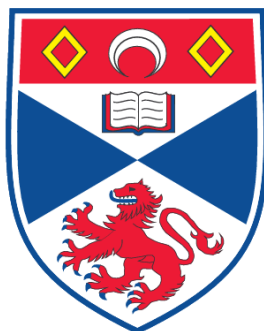


# **POSSIBLE PREFERENCES AND THE HARM OF EXISTENCE**

**Marc Larock**

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University of St. Andrews**



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**Possible Preferences and the Harm of Existence**

**By**

**Marc Larock**

**University of St Andrews**

**MPhil**

**13 November 2008**

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I was admitted as a research student in June 2007 as a candidate for the degree of M.Phil. in June 2007; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2007 and 2008.

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***If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man  
as it is: infinite.***

-William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

## Abstract

How good or bad is a person's life? How good or bad is a world? In this dissertation, I will attempt to answer these questions. Common-sense would dictate that if a person's life would be extremely bad, then bringing her into existence is a bad thing. Not only is it bad for the person who lives it, but also, it is bad because it makes the world a worse place. A world populated only by individuals who have lives full of unrelenting misery and suffering is certainly worse than a world only populated by individuals who are extremely well off. If we can measure the value of a person's life and the value of a world, then we can determine how good or bad our lives are and how good or bad the actual world is. Investigating these issues and providing satisfactory answers to these questions is immensely important.

In this dissertation I argue that all actual human lives are so bad that it would have been better had all of us never come into existence. I also argue that our world is worse than an empty world. The nucleus of my view consists of the following two claims:

- i. Each person has an interest in acquiring a new satisfied preference.
- ii. Whenever a person is deprived of a new satisfied preference this violates an interest and is thus a harm with a finite disvalue.

If one holds both (i) and (ii), then one is a *deprivationalist*. Any deprivationalist will have to claim that existence is worse for all actual persons than non-existence. I also show that deprivationalism presents a clear strategy for escaping The Repugnant

Conclusion and The Mere Addition Paradox. For a deprivationalist, the Non-Identity Problem is neutralized as well. Parfit's challenge in Reasons and Persons was to devise a theory of beneficence that could escape these cases without leading to other unacceptable conclusions. Parfit failed to find a theory—"Theory X"—that would meet these requirements. If the conclusions in this dissertation are correct, then deprivationalism is a good candidate for Theory X.

## Introduction

### I.

How good or bad is a person's life? How good or bad is a world? In this dissertation, I will attempt to answer these questions. Common-sense would dictate that if a person's life would be extremely bad, then bringing her into existence is a bad thing. It is bad in two respects. Not only is it bad for the person who lives it, but also, it is bad because it makes the world a worse place. A world populated only by individuals who have lives full of unrelenting misery and suffering is certainly worse than a world only populated by individuals who are extremely well off.

If we can measure the value of a person's life and the value of a world, then we can determine how good or bad our lives are and how good or bad the actual world is. Investigating these issues and providing satisfactory answers to these questions is immensely important. Perhaps our existence rests wholly on a crude moral miscalculation. Perhaps it would be better for all life in our world to end right now. On the other hand, perhaps this really is the best of all possible worlds. Maybe we are under strong obligations to bring many persons into existence. It could be that the world is not populated enough. I am interested in offering a theory that can tell us how *good* or *bad* a life or a world is. My ultimate aim in this dissertation will be to set out a novel approach for dealing with these questions.

As I stated above, I want to say that if a person's life is bad, then it is better if she does not live and if her life would be good, it would be better if she did live. Therefore, I am interested in offering a theory of value. Purely deontic considerations, though

interesting in their own right, are a peripheral issue. Of course, as long as we ought to do what is good and not what is bad, then there should be mappings from a theory of value to a deontic theory. However, my chief concerns in this dissertation are axiological in nature.

The first part of this dissertation will contain a review of the current literature on the subject of whether bringing people into existence is good or bad. It will be necessary to determine precisely what the major issues are related to this topic. Most of that section will be purely expository. However, I will offer critical remarks on many of the views presented therein.

The second part will focus on setting out and explaining my own argument concerning the value of bringing others into existence. After I have advanced my own argument, the next step will be to consider possible objections to my view. The final part of this dissertation will focus on examining the implications of my views. I will specifically address problems related to population ethics.

It may be helpful to take note of the following caveat. Debates about the morality of bringing people into existence raise deep and complex issues in moral philosophy, legal philosophy, and metaphysics. The debate is also carried out across both intellectual and religious borders. Therefore, it is important to note that this dissertation will focus, where possible, on the purely *philosophical* and *secular* side of the debate.

It should be noted that throughout this dissertation I will often appeal to intuitions. The intuitions upon which I will rely will hopefully map closely with the intuitions of others. This, however, cannot be guaranteed. One's intuitions undoubtedly vary depending upon one's educational, religious, and cultural background. One's



psychological and emotional disposition will also play a major role. Ideally, none of my arguments will rely too heavily on controversial intuitions. However, I believe that intuitions play a significant and important role in philosophical problem solving. The fact that a consensus can never be expected when one argues on the basis of intuitions is not evidence that they are unreliable or that they should play no role in philosophical problem solving. For those who think that cultivated intuitions play no role in philosophical problem solving, I can only say that some of my arguments will not seem very convincing.

## Chapter One

### I.

This chapter contains a discussion of the current literature surrounding the morality of procreation. I have divided the chapter into three sections. The first section contains an examination of arguments for the thesis that procreation is morally obligatory. The last section examines arguments for the thesis that procreation is morally impermissible. The second section contains an examination of arguments that occupy a middle-ground position. This chapter has two goals. One, to determine the strengths and weaknesses of some possible views one might have on the morality of procreation. Secondly, to gain a deeper understanding of the moral and metaphysical issues that drive the debate about the morality of procreation.

### II.

My examination of arguments for the thesis that procreation is morally obligatory will focus on two arguments. The first argument I will address will be an argument advanced by Saul Smilansky. This discussion will be followed by an examination of R.M. Hare's "Golden Rule" argument. I will first set out and explain the basic steps in each argument. Secondly, taking each argument in turn, I will argue that neither Hare nor Smilansky have offered sound arguments for the thesis that procreation is morally obligatory.

Before beginning this discussion, one should note that any argument to the effect that one has a moral duty to procreate will always suffer from the drawback that it is *prima facie* counter-intuitive. We do not generally think that one has a duty to procreate. Abstinence is usually viewed as being morally neutral. Any argument to the contrary,

one might argue, is extremely radical.

In his article, “Is There a Moral Obligation to Have Children?,” Saul Smilansky argues that people, in certain circumstances, are morally required to attempt to bring children into existence. Smilansky introduces the simplifying assumption that his argument is limited only to economically advanced countries. Smilansky begins his argument with an examination of eight common “pro-birth” arguments. For the sake of brevity, I will examine five of them.

The first argument Smilansky advances in favour of an obligation to have children is that creating people brings value into the world (Smilansky 46). Smilansky thinks that “to the extent that we believe that human beings are valuable, and/or that human beings are important for the appreciation of value in the world...to create human beings is *pro tanto* to contribute to the existence of value in the world” (Smilansky 46).

Second, he argues that loving *relationships* are one of the major sources of value in the world and therefore having children would “create value in the world in this way as well” (Smilansky 46). According to Smilansky, individuals “who do not have children...lose out” in two respects; namely, “they lack the personal development and the relationship with the child that only having children can supply” (Smilansky 46).<sup>1</sup>

He also advances the argument that if very “few children are born, those who do not have children will put a *burden* on the few who are born” (Smilansky 46). Smilansky thinks that “those who do not have children are in a sense ‘free riders’, for when they grow old they will depend on other people’s children” (Smilansky 46). Mere pragmatic concerns aside, “there seems to be something morally problematic about not reproducing

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<sup>1</sup> Smilansky has reported to me that he does not have anything but intuitions in support of his views on value. He has to date not discussed these ideas in considerable depth in other articles.

yourself and *not carrying one's share* in the continuation of society” (Smilansky 46). He states that “there is a need to explain why one lets others carry all the burden” of contributing to the perpetuation of society (Smilansky 46).

Fourth, he thinks that the “existence of *promises* to have children can also be a moral consideration towards a possible duty to have them” (Smilansky 46). For example, if John promises his girlfriend to marry her and have children, then it would be “morally problematic” of him to go back on his word after they were married (Smilansky 46).

He cites another closely related reason in support of a moral obligation to have children. There is also “the matter of the continuation of the genetic and cultural *familial* pool” (Smilansky 47). Often, he claims, one hears about “so many families with unique traditions and talents, which have given fruit for generations, dying out because the people who were the last link in the chain decided not to have children” (Smilansky 47). If the contributions of certain families are of tremendous value, “it becomes plausible to see those responsible for the disappearance of this value as (morally) potentially culpable” (Smilansky 47).

Smilansky thinks that the above arguments will have varying force depending upon the prevailing circumstances. For example, if humanity were gradually dying out due to lack of reproduction, then many of the pro-birth arguments set out above “would be activated in the strongest possible way” (Smilansky 48). In other, normal circumstances, however, these arguments would not carry as much weight. Smilansky thinks that despite the lack of consistency in the force of the pro-birth case, one may safely draw the following conclusions. First, there is a “*prima facie* strong moral duty on almost everyone to have children” (which is not actualized given the stable birth rate in

the world today, i.e., because humanity is not dying out). Second, “there is generally a weak moral presumption (but not a strict obligation) in favour of having children, so that not having them is *pro tanto* problematic, and not *morally neutral*” (Smilansky 51). Last, there can also be “a direct personal obligation to have children” (Smilansky 51). Smilansky concludes that there “is rarely a strict moral obligation to have children,” however, there are “*inclining* moral considerations in favour of having children” (Smilansky 51).

In assessing Smilansky’s argument, it is important to note precisely what conclusion Smilansky has argued for in this article. Smilansky’s argument merely gets him the conclusion that only in certain very rare circumstances is there a strict moral obligation to have children. Only in a case where the human race is dying out would there be, on this view, an obligation to have children. However, even Smilansky concedes that such a scenario is exceedingly unlikely, “barring some not impossible calamity” (Smilansky 48). Therefore, Smilansky seems to be left with what he calls “inclining reasons, which should affect different people, in different situations, to different degrees” (Smilansky 52). It is clear that even if Smilansky has constructed a sound argument, which I doubt, his conclusion is still extremely weak. In what follows, I will evaluate the strength of each argument Smilansky has offered in support of his conclusion.

First, Smilansky claims “that to give birth to children is to *bring value* into the world” (Smilansky 46). He thinks that “a world without people who have value and without the value that human appreciation creates...seems like a nightmare” (Smilansky 48). Smilansky is making two separate claims. One is that people have intrinsic value,

that is, that people themselves are valuable. Second, that people create value by appreciating things like music, philosophy, nature, loving relationships, etc.. Since he never offers any arguments for these claims, they are difficult to evaluate.<sup>2</sup> It should, however, suffice to state that neither claim is obviously true. Also, these unsupported claims leave many questions unanswered. For example, do non-human animals have intrinsic value and are they value appreciators in the morally relevant sense that people are? If so, then the argument from value does not seem to provide us with a good reason to perpetuate the human species.<sup>3</sup> All value could reasonably be provided by non-humans if the human race completely vanished.<sup>4 5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>There is the major question of what “value” means when Smilansky says that human beings are valuable. As I see it, there are two possible ways of interpreting the meaning of this term. First, value might denote something like importance. On this reading Smilansky could be claiming that humans are important and to bring more humans into existence makes the world better because of this importance. Alternatively, value could mean moral value or moral worth. In which case it seems that the claim that humans are valuable only means that humans are creatures to whom we have serious moral obligations. In other words, all humans are persons.

The problem is that if the first interpretation is correct, then value is a vague term with a meaning that is highly ambiguous. Also, if this reading is correct, then I think that Smilansky’s claims are even more in need of support. If the latter interpretation is correct, then the claim that all humans are valuable is equivalent to the claim that all humans are persons. However, the latter claim is clearly false. Most moral philosophers believe that some human beings are not persons (e.g., Tooley, McMahan, Singer, Frankfurt, etc.). More controversially, many non-humans could be persons. So, it seems that on this reading, Smilansky’s claim is clearly false. It is not clear how creating persons, if one grants Smilansky the controversial claim that all humans are persons, brings value into the world. More accurately, one might argue that bringing persons into existence creates more moral obligations and more beings that warrant serious moral consideration. This is different from making the world a more valuable place. Furthermore, if one is committed to this interpretation, then clearly there is an equivocation involved in Smilansky’s argument. He clearly uses the term ‘value’ in different ways when he claims that a) human beings are valuable and that b) loving relationships are a source of value. However, for the sake of simplicity, I will assume for the remainder of this section that “value” indicates “importance.”

<sup>3</sup> I want to stress that in challenging these claims I am in no way intending to challenge or undermine basic value claims or moral obligations in general. I do not see the rejection of Smilansky’s claims as a rejection of basic value claims that people would accept as a basis for discussion in this area.

<sup>4</sup> If this suggestion were correct, then one might argue that since both humans and non-humans have value, the extinction of humanity would, in itself, be a bad thing. One might argue that non-human value would only compensate if, as a result of the extinction of humans, there were more non-humans. This seems reasonable to think as long as one assumes either that a) all non-humans and humans are equally valuable or b) the number of non-humans who are as valuable as humans would increase sufficiently to compensate for the extinction of humans.

<sup>5</sup> Smilansky might object that, although (some) non-humans have value, humans have more value. If so, then non-human value could not compensate for the loss of human value. However, while these claims

In addition, one might also raise a concern about whether this argument actually supports Smilansky's conclusion. Consider the case of an infant who is born with anencephaly and therefore missing much of its brain. First, it is not the case that, even though the anencephalic infant is a child, it will be able to appreciate anything and therefore contribute to the overall value of the world as a value appreciator. Secondly, it is also not clear that the anencephalic infant has any value in and of itself (it seems reasonable to view it as mere organic matter). The upshot of this criticism is that Smilansky's conclusion does not follow from the argument from value. It is not that people, in certain circumstances, are required to have children but, rather, they are required to have certain kinds of children. The anencephalic infant is certainly a child. However, it is not the kind of child that Smilansky thinks it is a moral requirement to have. Smilansky seems to be arguing for the thesis that one should have children who will, other things being equal, grow into normal adult human beings with a capacity to procreate. Therefore, although he does not say so, Smilansky has a very specific sort of child in mind when he says that one might have a moral duty to procreate.

Smilansky argues that loving relationships are a major source of value in the world. He concludes that "having children would thus create value in the world in this way as well" (Smilansky 46). Individuals who do not have children, he thinks, miss out on "the personal development and the relationship with the child that only having children can supply" (Smilansky 46). I do not find this argument convincing either. First, it is inadequately supported. I see no reason to think that loving relationships are a source of value in the world. Smilansky has provided no reason to accept this claim.

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seem reasonable enough, they would require a precise explication and defence. Therefore, I will set these objections aside.

Secondly, because his arguments are aimed at people in developed countries, there is no reason to think that the loving relationships that result from child rearing experiences cannot be duplicated by people who adopt children from Third World countries. Smilansky seems to be assuming, quite incorrectly, that in order to have a loving relationship with a child one needs to be related to the child in a familial way. Certainly, people who do not have children but, rather, adopt unwanted children (of which there are many) have deep emotional and personal connections with their adopted children. There does not seem to be a reason to think that there needs to be a biological connection for there to be a loving relationship. In addition, many people have loving relationships with their pets. It would be mistaken to deemphasize the depth of emotional connection and feeling that people can have with non-human animals. In some cases this emotional connection can be just as strong and personally important as a normal parent to child relationship.

Smilansky's third pro-birth argument was that people who do not have children are morally "parasitic" and are societal "free riders" because they do not share in the burden of providing society with people who can support the economy and provide services (Smilansky 46). Smilansky suggests that people with children are entitled to more support from society because they are doing something for the general good of society for which they get little in return. Beyond mere practical concerns, he thinks that "there seems to be something morally problematic about not reproducing yourself" and not sharing "in the continuation of society" (Smilansky 46).

As for the first claim, it is difficult to see how one who pays taxes one's whole life and who pays for services rendered in old age could plausibly be seen as a "free



rider.” If I pay for high-quality health care as an older person, it is not reasonable to call me a free rider or a moral parasite despite the fact that I never had children of my own. I also doubt the truth of Smilansky’s second claim. People with children receive enormous benefits from society. Up until 1970 a man could receive a draft deferment in the United States during time of war purely on paternity grounds. People in the U.S. also receive tax deductions for having children. Indeed, one might consider it to be unfair that people with children receive so many benefits from society. It is not obviously the case that the people who do not have children are the real “free riders.”

If what Smilansky has claimed is correct, then perhaps one should be more concerned with individuals who have children who are either severely physically disabled or moderately/severely mentally disabled. Not only will such individuals have to depend upon other people’s children for their own care as they age but, also, their children will similarly be dependent upon society. Smilansky’s argument would seem to suggest that such individuals should get significantly less support from society than people who choose not to procreate and certainly less than those who have healthy, able-bodied children. This may be correct, yet, many might find it to be unsatisfactory.

Smilansky’s fourth pro-birth argument was that promises to have children are morally binding. I see no reason to accept this claim. It is not obvious that procreation is morally responsible. Some philosophers have argued that it is seriously wrong to have children. Consider this parallel example. Suppose Mary conceives a child of which John is the father. John makes Mary promise to have an abortion and Mary does so. However, just before her visit to the doctor, Mary encounters a highly persuasive, perfectly sound philosophical argument for the thesis that abortion is immoral. Would it be wrong, in

light of the new information Mary has obtained, not to have the abortion? If I make a promise and then upon gaining complete information regarding my promise that indicates that I should not do the thing I promised, one would normally think that I am released from my agreement. There does not seem to be reason for thinking that the case is any different for procreation.

Smilansky could reply that, at least, a promise creates a *prima facie* obligation. However, this means very little and would apply equally well to any promise. A promise to rob a bank would create the same weak *prima facie* obligation that a promise to procreate would. In the end, Smilansky would get very little mileage out of this reply. It seems that this reply will work only if he has first proven that procreation is permissible.

Smilansky also argues that those who do not have children are to some degree morally responsible for letting important familial genetic traits, such as good-looks or musical ability, die out. There are two problems with this argument. First, it only applies to those people who have the “unique traditions and talents” which will give “fruit for generations” that Smilansky writes about. There are undoubtedly many individuals with relatively unimpressive family histories and no special talents. These individuals would, on this argument, be excluded from the moral imperative to have children. Second, it is certainly not obvious that talents such as musical ability are inherited. For example, a study by Coon and Carey suggests that musical talent is influenced more by shared family environment than by shared genes (Coon and Carey 183)<sup>6</sup>. Anecdotal evidence also confirms this. Mozart had two sons that lived. The oldest never became a professional musician and the youngest enjoyed only moderate success as a teacher and

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<sup>6</sup> See Hilary Coon and Gregory Carey. “Genetic and Environmental Determinants of Musical Ability in Twins.” *Behavior Genetics*. Vol. 19 No. 2 (1989).

performer of music. By not perpetuating one's genetic material, perhaps one is not contributing to the disappearance of unique talents as Smilansky seems to think. As for the perpetuation of unique family traditions, one could just as easily adopt a child (perhaps from the Third World) and teach one's family traditions to her (the above discussion would also seem to suggest that one could do the same with musical talents). One need not have children of one's own. Therefore, Smilansky's argument seems to fail.

In the final analysis, Smilansky's arguments for the thesis that there are significant moral considerations in favour of having children and perhaps a strong moral duty to have children do not seem to be convincing. One major problem that emerged when considering Smilansky's arguments was that he seems to be assuming that parenthood is restricted to being biologically related to one's offspring. The continuation of traditions, cultural forms of life, loving familial relationships and the propagation of society as a whole could all be achieved without biologically reproducing one's self. A great deal of weight is placed on the reputed value of human beings. However, he never argued for the view that humans are intrinsically valuable. I will merely point out that it is not obviously true. Smilansky has offered a wealth of pro-birth arguments. All of which suffer from significant drawbacks and undefended assumptions. If one is going to defend the view that it is morally obligatory to have children, one will have to look elsewhere.

In his article, "Abortion and the Golden Rule," R.M. Hare argues that one can harm individuals by not bringing them into existence. The basis of Hare's argument is the so-called "Golden Rule;" namely, that we should do to others as we wish them to do

to us. Hare notes that it “is a logical extension of this form of argument to say that we should do to others what *we are glad was* done to us” (Hare 208). Hare thinks that it is easy to apply the modified Golden Rule to the problem of abortion. That is, if one is “glad that nobody terminated the pregnancy that resulted in” one’s birth, then it follows that one is obligated not “to terminate any pregnancy which will result in the birth of a person having a life like ours” (Hare 208).

Hare thinks that his moral principle applies not only to those who have lives that will be “just like that of the aborter” but, also, “it is generalizable to cover the abortion of any fetus which will, if not aborted, turn into someone who will be glad to be alive” (Hare 209). The substance of Hare’s argument is this. When “I am glad that I was born...I do not confine this gladness to gladness that they did not abort me. I am glad, also, that my parents copulated in the first place, without contraception. So from my gladness, in conjunction with the extended Golden Rule, I derive not only a duty not to abort, but also a duty not to abstain from procreation” (Hare 212).

Now that I have set out the basic steps in Hare’s argument, I will seek to determine whether or not it is sound. To begin, Hare thinks that if one can say that one was glad that “nobody terminated the pregnancy that” lead to one’s birth, by the modified Golden Rule, one would be “enjoined not, *ceteris paribus*, to terminate any pregnancy which will result in the birth of a person having” a life similar to one’s own (Hare 208). I have a problem with this view.

Hare’s principle demands that one bring individuals into existence who will be glad to have come into existence. This, as he points out, is a logical consequence of the Golden Rule. However, why should one think that being glad that one was born is a

reliable indicator of moral duties concerning procreation? My criticism is that there is a big difference between being satisfied that one exists and having a good quality of life. It is a failure to fully realize the significance of this difference that causes problems for Hare.

Consider the case of an individual, John, who is afflicted with Huntington's disease (HD). HD is characterized by gradual (over a period of many years) loss of motor control, speech, and severe cognitive impairment. HD is autosomal dominant, which means that a parent with HD has a 50% chance of passing it on to their offspring. Many would think that someone with Huntington's disease should refrain from having children. Yet, what if someone with HD reasoned as follows: "Even though I have this horrible condition, I am still glad that I was born. So, from my gladness, in conjunction with the Golden Rule, I recognize that I have a duty to procreate. I will do this despite the fact that my children will have a 50% chance of suffering my fate. After all, I have lived a good and mostly happy life, so there is no reason why my children won't." Most people, I think, would consider this person to be extremely morally flawed. Therefore, there must be something seriously wrong with Hare's argument.<sup>7</sup>

The main problem is that depending upon one's personality and emotional disposition it might be possible for one to consider oneself to be fortunate to have been born no matter what one's circumstances are. The way people evaluate the conditions of their lives is highly subjective and certainly depends on the interactions of many complex psychological factors. A person could be overly optimistic or completely delusional and therefore view their life as better than it really is. So, the question is, why think that such

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<sup>7</sup> This example is parallel to one found in Bonnie Steinbock and Ron McClamrock. "When Is Birth Unfair to the Child?" Hastings Center Report. Vol. 24, No. 6 (1994): 15-21.

highly subjective evaluations are reliable indicators of what is morally required of us? Hare's argument seems to commit one to wildly implausible and highly counter-intuitive consequences.

David Benatar has argued that people value their existence mostly because they are engaged in a mass self-deception. Benatar points out that "there is the phenomenon of how people's quality-of-life evaluations differ and change" (Benatar 353). "Very often," Benatar thinks, "people who have or acquire" horrible diseases or disabilities "adapt to them and prefer existence with these conditions to never existing (or ceasing to exist)" (Benatar 353). Benatar thinks that such self-deception might have an evolutionary basis. Such adaptive preferences would certainly facilitate survival of the species. He thinks that the adaptive preference argument shows "that the mere belief that one has been benefited is not sufficient to show that one has been benefited or that one's appraisal is rational. We should not take a slave's endorsement of his slavery as conclusive evidence that slavery is in his interests" (Benatar 353).

Above I have argued against Hare's argument for the thesis that procreation might be a moral requirement. As I see it, the most significant argument against Hare is that we have no reason to think that first-person assessments about the quality of our lives are trustworthy. I introduced Benatar's theories about adaptive preferences to strengthen my claim and also to explain why many people might be engaged in such mass self-deception about the quality of their lives. I believe that, in the philosophical hands of someone like Hare, such self-deception could be morally dangerous. There are other arguments that can be made against this view.

In his article, "Harm to the Unconceived," Michael D. Bayles argues that non-

existent persons cannot be individuated the way Hare thinks they can be. Hare makes two claims related to this issue. First, one can identify non-existent persons by the description “the person who will be born if these two people start their coitus in precisely five minutes” (Hare 220). Second, if one had enough information, one could specify all of a potential person’s traits “with as much precision as we could the result of a lottery done on a computer whose randomizing mechanism we could minutely inspect” (Hare 220).

Bayles argues that Hare’s claims do not suffice to identify a non-existent person. The description embedded in Hare’s first claim does not designate anyone in particular (Bayles 299). First, most instances of coitus do not result in conception (Bayles 300). Second, and more importantly, “Hare’s description does not distinguish between the different people who will be born depending upon which sperm in fact fertilizes the ovum” (Bayles 300).

Bayles also rejects Hare’s second claim on the grounds that it is imprecise. First, the use of the term “enough” renders the claim tautological. That is, “enough information to specify a person’s traits is the amount which will enable one to do so” (Bayles 300). In addition, Hare “does not say how much precision he thinks is possible in predicting the results of a lottery, so it is unclear that it will be sufficiently precise to designate a particular person” (Bayles 300). Last, if Hare “intends only genetically determined traits, he cannot distinguish between identical twins” (Bayles 300).

Bayles also charges Hare with “failing to establish that one harms a person by not” bringing them into existence (Bayles 298). Bayles notes that just because “a person would be better off were one to act in a certain way, it does not follow that failure to so

act harms him” (Bayles 298). Essentially, Hare has collapsed the distinction between harm and non-benefit (Bayles 298). Failure to appreciate this distinction results in leaving no conceptual room for non-obligatory gifts (Bayles 298).

In this section, I have considered arguments by Saul Smilansky and R.M. Hare for the thesis that we have a moral obligation to bring others into existence. Neither Smilansky’s nor Hare’s arguments are satisfactory. One may conclude that these arguments do not establish a general moral obligation to procreate.

### III.

Now that I have considered arguments for the thesis that there is a moral obligation to bring other people into existence, I will now focus on the issue of whether procreation is neither entirely obligatory nor prohibited. To settle this issue, I will consider two arguments. First, I will evaluate Christoph Fehige’s preference-based account. My discussion of Fehige’s account will be followed by an examination of an argument advanced by Nils Holtug.

In his article, “A Pareto Principle for Possible People,” Christoph Fehige argues for a view he calls “Anti-frustrationism.” At the core of Fehige’s argument is a modified version of preference-based ethics. According to the preference-based approach, it is good that, other things being equal, “if individual *a* wants it to be the case that *p*, then *p*” (Fehige 509). On this view, “the good is made up from what is good *for* individuals” (Fehige 511). Anti-frustrationism says that it does not matter that preferences “have a satisfied existence, but that they don’t have a frustrated existence” (Fehige 518).

Fehige introduces what he calls “Good Sentences.” A Good Sentence is a conditional of the form: “if, at point of time *t* and with strength *s*, individual *a* wants it to



be the case that  $p$ , then  $p$ ” (Fehige 509). According to preference-based ethics, “Good Sentences are the atoms of the good” (Fehige 519). One corollary of anti-frustrationist morality is the principle of Pareto-superiority among wishes (POPSAW). POPSAW states that (i) “if the Good Sentences true in world  $\alpha$  form a proper subset of those true in world  $\beta$ , then  $\beta$  is better than  $\alpha$ ” and (ii) “if the Good Sentences true in world  $\alpha$  form a subset of those true in world  $\beta$ , then  $\beta$  is at least as good as  $\alpha$ ” (Fehige 519). Essentially, POPSAW states that “if a world has all the atoms of the good that another world has, *and some more*, then” the world cannot fail to be better (Fehige 519).

Fehige notes that POPSAW does not look favourably upon existence. POPSAW entails that (i) nothing can be better than a world without the existence of a single preference at anytime in its history (i.e., an empty world), (ii) the actual world is worse than an empty world, and (iii) it is *ceteris paribus* wrong to create a being that will have an unfulfilled preference (Fehige 521). For Fehige, the existence of a person with all satisfied preferences is morally neutral, “and one tiny preference frustration is one tiny departure from neutrality towards badness” (Fehige 523).

To conclude that humans should stop procreating because future people will have frustrated preferences would be incorrect. This is because “POPSAW permits the show to go on as long as there are, or if there ever will have been (as indeed there have), people who want it to go on” (Fehige 523). Claim (ii) does not imply that we should eliminate the world of preferers because it is wrong to bring preferers into existence who will have frustrated preferences. This is because there have already been preferences in our world; it has already been irreparably tarnished. Therefore, “POPSAW does not prescribe childlessness to would-be parents” (Fehige 522).

According to Fehige, then, complete satisfaction of preferences merely brings one to the level of well-being one would have had if one had not had any preferences at all. Thus, a non-existent individual has the same level of well-being that an existent individual has who is living the best possible human life, a life of complete preference satisfaction. Both the existent with complete preference satisfaction and the non-existent are assigned maximum levels of utility on Fehige's theory.

On Fehige's account, procreation is not morally impermissible. Procreation may not be morally desirable because (at least in the actual world) it entails that there will always be *some* preference frustration, yet, Fehige's view does not demand that people remain childless. Now that Fehige's argument has been outlined, I will now determine if his account is adequate.

I will begin by advancing what I call *the absent consciousness argument*. The thrust of the argument is this. There is a gap between cases where (a) someone exists with some frustrated preferences (as in the case of most real-life cases), cases where (b) someone does not exist, and finally where (c) someone exists but does not have any preferences. Fehige's view would seem to dictate that (b) and (c) are equally good and that (a) is the least desirable of the three cases. This may be, but I believe that the view conflicts with common-sense morality.

Consider the following cases:

*The Normal Infant.* A healthy infant is born who will lead a life that, like most human lives, is replete with preference frustration.

*The Anencephalic Infant.* An infant is born with anencephaly and therefore missing much of its brain. It has no conscious experience and therefore no preferences. It will lead a completely blank life for thirty weeks after which it will die.

According to Fehige, it would seem that the anencephalic infant is far better-off than the normal infant. The anencephalic infant will have no preferences at all. Meanwhile, the normal infant will have *at least* one frustrated preference. Therefore, between the choice of bringing into existence either child, it would be better, according to Fehige, to bring the anencephalic infant into existence. This conclusion seems to be at variance with common-sense. Most people would think that a non-conscious, blank life is worse than a life with some good and bad aspects. However, there is no room for these intuitions within Fehige's account.

Fehige might respond to my argument as follows. True, the notion that a blank, unconscious life is better than a fully sentient life with some (but not too many) frustrated preferences seems counter-intuitive. However, the absent consciousness argument is unsound because it has a false premise; namely, the anencephalic infant is an individual who exists in a meaningful sense of the term. Because the anencephalic infant has no mental life, it might be argued that there is no *individual* present. The anencephalic infant's life is not bad because conceiving the anencephalic infant is not bringing anyone into existence at all.

I would respond by pointing out that the absent consciousness argument could be formulated in a weaker form. I could reformulate the argument so that the anencephalic infant is replaced with another infant who has severe cognitive disabilities such that it does not have the cognitive abilities to have preferences. One might imagine that the infant in question will only have mental abilities roughly equivalent to those of an insect. The full extent of the infant's mental life would consist of responding to stimuli. It would surely make sense to say that the infant (and later child and adult) is a living,

existing, human individual, one with no preferences. The proposed response, I conclude, does not neutralize the absent consciousness argument.

Another problem for Fehige's account is that it is *ceteris paribus* wrong to bring into existence a being with a single frustrated preference. However, as long as a person prefers to have a child, then the *ceteris paribus* clause drops out of the picture. It is strange, one would think, that the moral wrong of this action can be neutralized simply by someone's wanting it not to be wrong. Yet, this is what Fehige's account seems to dictate.<sup>8</sup>

Concerns have also been raised in the literature concerning Fehige's argument. Recently Clark Wolf has argued that "anti-frustrationism may pass too quickly over the very plausible possibility that some preferences might be enjoyable and desirable in themselves, and that some pleasures may constitute positive benefits rather than simply the removal of painful longings" (Wolf 110). Sometimes people have a higher level of well-being "if they have preferences to be satisfied than they would have been" in the absence of the preferences in question (Wolf 110). Wolf thinks that it is the case that there are certain preferences the "possession of which makes our lives better" (Wolf 110). He thinks that if this were not the case, then it would be difficult to see why people would "take pains to develop expensive and refined tastes" (Wolf 110). After all, the possession of these tastes seems to "make life richer by virtue of the rare but profound satisfaction enjoyed when these tastes are satisfied" (Wolf 110).

The main problem is that Fehige's view contains "a negative account of well-

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<sup>8</sup> Fehige might contend that one must take account of all preferences. For example, John's preference for killing Mary is not sufficient to make it not wrong. However, it is difficult to see how such a line of reasoning can be applied to the case of procreation. How could one take account of the preferences of possible future persons?

being as the absence of frustrated or unsatisfied preferences or desires” (Wolf 110). The problem is that Fehige’s account seems to leave out “an account of desire that better captures the positive role that desires, satisfactions, and passions play in our lives” (Wolf 110). Many might not find Fehige’s account plausible in the absence of “an account of preference that recognizes this positive role” (Wolf 110). He concludes that Fehige is too quick to argue “that there is no independent value for sweet longings and cultivated preferences, and that no desires are desirable for their own sake” (Wolf 110).

Fehige’s preference based account seems to leave much desired. Next, I will discuss another argument that occupies the moral middle ground in the debate about bringing persons into existence.

Nils Holtug has addressed the issue of whether procreation is morally permissible. In his essay, “On the Value of Coming into Existence,” Holtug argues that coming into existence can harm or benefit an individual. Although Holtug’s argument cannot properly be seen as an exploration of the obligations that one has to possible and future persons, one can easily extract an argument for the thesis that “we have some moral reason to cause people to exist” or not to exist (Holtug 384).

In his article, Holtug defends a view which he calls the “Value of Existence View.” According to this view, “existence can benefit (or harm) a person” who is caused to exist (Holtug 362). Essentially, “a person is benefited by coming into existence if, on balance, his life is worth living, and harmed if, on balance, it is worth not living” (Holtug 362).

He bases his argument for this view on a comparative judgment. He claims “that having a life in which the good outweighs the bad can be better than never existing”

(Holtug 364). However, he does not argue “that existence as such can be better than never existing” (Holtug 364). Because Holtug is committed to making comparisons about the well-being that a person has in cases of existence and non-existence, “the details of the comparison will depend on the particular theory of well-being assumed” (Holtug 364).

Holtug does not formally commit himself to any particular theory of well-being. Yet, textual evidence strongly suggests that he favours an object account of a preference-based approach. According to this view, “it is the object of an intrinsic preference that has intrinsic value” (Holtug 364). On an object account of preference theory, if John prefers (desires) a cigarette, then “what has intrinsic value on the object account is the state of affairs” in which he smokes a cigarette (Holtug 365). Holtug notes that this account has the merit that it easily “allows for an assessment of” a person’s “existence and his non-existence” on the basis of “one global preference” (Holtug 365).

Holtug would have one consider an individual who exists, say, John. Suppose that John intrinsically prefers existence to non-existence. This particular preference “is global in the sense that it has an entire life as one of its objects” (Holtug 365). John’s preference, then, provides us with “a ranking of the two objects, the state of affairs” in which John exists “and the state of affairs that he does not” (Holtug 365). Since John prefers his existence to non-existence, then the former state of affairs is the better one (Holtug 365).

In order to “conclude that the former state is better” for John, Holtug thinks that John’s preference must satisfy two requirements (Holtug 365). First, the preference must be self-regarding and it must also be rational (Holtug 365). By the term “rational,”

Holtug means that John's preference "would survive full (or ideal) information about its objects" (Holtug 365). However, "this condition does not require" John actually to possess or have access to "full information about his life and what non-existence would amount to in order to rationally prefer existence" (Holtug 365). John's "preference establishes the evaluative ordering of his existence and his non-existence all by itself" (Holtug 381). No appeal to "a preference from a possible world in which" John "does not exist" is at all necessary (Holtug 381).

From the above considerations, Holtug concludes that, because of John's preference, "he has benefited from coming into existence. Had he preferred never to exist, he would have been harmed instead" (Holtug 365). Holtug shows that the Value of Existence View is compatible with other theories of well-being. However, the clear emphasis of Holtug's argument is the object version of preference theory. After considering various objections, Holtug concludes that if an individual, such as John, "can be benefited by coming into existence, it may seem that we have some moral reason to cause people to exist" (Holtug 384). He thinks that "acceptance of the Value of Existence View may make it difficult to resist the claim that, everything else being equal, we ought to cause (happy) people to exist" (Holtug 384). This view, he thinks, "may even put a certain amount of pressure on us to hold that there are situations in which we are obliged to create new people all things considered" (Holtug 384).

In evaluating Holtug's argument, one must make note of the following points. Admittedly Holtug does not see his argument as relating directly to issues in population policy. His argument only briefly suggests how one might use the Value of Existence View to support the conclusion that there may be situations in which one might be under

a moral obligation to or refrain from bringing others into existence. This fact, however, should not stop one from evaluating his argument within the present context.

One might have certain reservations about Holtug's view. First, recall that one can rationally prefer to exist in the absence of full or ideal information about one's life. Because one never has full information about one's life it seems that one could easily be mistaken in one's assessment of the quality of one's life. Second, most lives change (sometimes quite drastically) from moment to moment. This means that one might be glad that one exists at one moment and not so at another. In many cases, there would seem to be no fact of the matter as to whether one benefited or not from existence.

Perhaps Holtug might respond as follows. True, judgments about the value of someone's existence can be fallible and inaccurate. Yet, this does not make the Value of Existence View incapable of truth. All the view states is that one can be benefited or harmed by coming into existence, not that one can necessarily apply the view to real-life cases and make judgments about them.

Indeed, I think there is strong textual evidence to support the view that Holtug would respond to my criticisms in this way. Holtug states that "all the Value of Existence View says is that it can benefit (or harm) a person to come into existence, not that one can make reliable predictions in advance about whether existence will benefit or harm a person in a particular case" (Holtug 364-365). My objections here seek to expose a zone of vulnerability in Holtug's view. The general concern is that it is difficult to see precisely how one could apply his view to actual lives. The above quote seems to suggest that he is rather ambivalent as to whether his view is actually useful in real-life cases.



If Holtug were to respond to my concerns in the above way, I think his reply would be incredibly weak. This response seems to relegate the Value of Existence View to the level of an inept, theoretical tool. The fact of the matter is that *nobody* knows what their life will look like as a whole. It seems that a view like Holtug's is only significant if it can be applied to real-life cases. The response under consideration seems to sacrifice a great deal.

The above problem raises two clear concerns for Holtug's theory. First, Holtug's argument for the conclusion that existence can be better or worse than non-existence may be plausible, but it is not interesting, since we can never know how a person's life will turn out. His view would be true, if it is, only in a vacuous way. Second, and more important, Holtug's argument for the conclusion that existence can be better or worse than non-existence may be plausible, yet, because we can never know how a person's life will turn out, it is difficult to see how his view can give us guidance with normative issues. Both concerns raise significant problems for Holtug.

One last concern about Holtug's theory is this. Consider the following scenario. Suppose a couple are considering whether or not to have a child. Suppose that the couple know that if they conceive, their offspring will have an extremely rare condition known as *dicephalus*. This condition occurs when a zygote divides incompletely and results in twins conjoined below the neck. Furthermore, suppose that the couple know that one twin, Mary, will rationally prefer existence over non-existence because her life will be worth living and that the other, Jill, will not prefer existence over non-existence because she will be miserable. It seems that Holtug's theory cannot give us precise guidance in this situation. If we are under moral obligations to cause happy people to exist and to

prevent unhappy lives, as Holtug thinks, then what should we do in cases where bringing a happy person into existence necessarily involves bringing an unhappy person into existence? This case reveals a significant gap in Holtug's argument.<sup>9</sup>

In this section, I have examined arguments for the thesis that procreation is neither entirely morally obligatory nor morally impermissible. Both arguments discussed in this section had their merits and drawbacks. In the next section I will examine an argument for the thesis that procreation is morally impermissible.

#### IV.

I will now examine an argument advanced by David Benatar for the thesis that procreation is morally impermissible. I will begin by reviewing the basic steps in Benatar's argument. Lastly, I will consider some objections to his view.

In his article, "Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence," Benatar defends the view that non-existence is morally preferable to existence. From this, Benatar draws the further conclusion that bringing others into existence is not morally preferable. Benatar qualifies his conclusion by stating that not all cases of coming into existence are equally disadvantageous. The more a life is filled with pleasures, he thinks, the less the individual was wronged by coming into existence.

Benatar views pains and pleasures as exemplars of harms and benefits. He claims that it is uncontroversial that the presence of pain is bad and that the presence of pleasure is good. However, Benatar does not think that there is a similar symmetry between the absence of pain and pleasure. He thinks that "the absence of pain is good," even if this

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<sup>9</sup> In fairness, I should mention that this problem is not peculiar to Holtug's case. This problem undoubtedly emerges in any scenario in which people have competing preferences. Therefore, this is a problem for any theory that bases value on preferences.

good is not experienced by anyone (Benatar 347). Conversely, “the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation” (Benatar 347).

Benatar notes that there are a variety of reasons why one should accept his analysis. First, he thinks that his “view is the best explanation of the commonly held view that while there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, there is no duty to bring happy people into being” (Benatar 347). Secondly, while “it seems strange to give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited, sometimes we do avoid bringing a child into existence because of the potential child’s interests” (Benatar 346). He also points out that “[i]f having children were done for the purpose of thereby benefiting those children, then there would be greater moral reason for at least many people to have more children” (Benatar 346). In contrast to these cases, “our concern for the welfare of potential children who would suffer is taken to be a sound basis for deciding not to have the child” (Benatar 346). Benatar concludes that if the absence of pleasure was bad irrespective of whether it was bad for anyone, “then having children for their own sakes would not seem odd” (Benatar 346).

Lastly, support for his argument can be drawn from our retrospective judgments concerning procreation. He notes that both bringing people into existence and failing to bring people into existence can be regretted. However, “only bringing people into existence can be regretted for the sake of the person whose existence was contingent on our decision” (Benatar 346). He concludes that “we do not lament our failure to bring” people into existence because “absent pleasures are not bad” (Benatar 347).

From the above considerations, Benatar derives the conclusion that it is better never to come into existence. By considering the asymmetry between the absence of pain and pleasure, he thinks one can ascertain the advantages and disadvantages of existence and non-existence. One way involves the following reasoning. It is a good thing that people who exist experience and enjoy pleasure. Yet, it is also a good thing “that pains are avoided through non-existence” (Benatar 348). Because there is something bad about coming into existence (i.e., the experience of pain), but there is nothing bad about not coming into existence (i.e., the absence of pleasure “is not bad because there is nobody deprived of the absent pleasures”), it follows that it is better never to come into existence (Benatar 346-347).

For Benatar, not all instances of coming to be are equally bad. Indeed, the more a life is filled with positive features the better it is, “and so the less disadvantageous existence is” for the person (Benatar 348). However, as long as there are *some* negative aspects, “the life is not preferable to never having come into existence” (Benatar 349).

According to Benatar it follows from the above arguments that, at the very least, one could make the minimal claim that procreation is not a morally desirable course of action. Even if one’s potential offspring would “not regret coming into existence, they certainly would not regret not coming into existence” (Benatar 353). Therefore, since it is not in anyone’s “interests to come into being, the morally desirable course of action is to ensure that they do not” (Benatar 353). Benatar notes that it is a direct implication of his “view that it would be preferable for our species to die out” (Benatar 353). Benatar thinks that there is nothing “inherently intolerable” about such a state of affairs (Benatar 353).

I have now set out the basic steps in Benatar's argument. Next, I will determine whether he has constructed a sound argument. According to Benatar, not all instances of coming into existence are equally bad. He claims that the more a life is filled with "positive features," the better it is (Benatar 350). However, as long as the life has "some negative aspects, the life is not preferable to never having come into existence" (Benatar 350). These passages are somewhat vague. I think that it is reasonable to assume, given earlier passages, that Benatar means pain by the phrase "negative aspects" and pleasure by "positive features." Given the overall content of the article, it is reasonable to assume that some hedonic interpretation of this passage is correct. This presents some problems.

Benatar thinks that as long as one experiences some pains, then one was harmed by coming into existence. Yet, on this view people can be harmed to greater and lesser degrees. It is reasonable to suppose that the harm of causing a person to exist is proportional to the amount of pain they experience in life. So, the more a person suffers pain, the worse their life is and the greater the harm of existence. Benatar would seem to advocate the following principle:

*The Hedonic Evaluation Principle.* Between two individuals, *X* and *Y*, if *X* will suffer more pains in *X*'s life than *Y* will, it follows that it is worse to bring *X* into existence than it is to bring *Y* into existence even though both are harmed by coming into existence.

The hedonic evaluation principle seems to be a direct consequence of Benatar's argument. However, if his views commit him to such a principle, then I think his theory has a significant flaw. Recall that a significant counter-argument against Fehige's theory was what I called the *absent consciousness argument*. This argument can be applied equally well to Benatar's view. Again, consider the following cases:

*The Anencephalic Infant.* An infant is born with anencephaly and therefore

missing much of its brain. It has no conscious experience and it will die within thirty weeks.

*The Normal Infant.* A healthy infant is born who will later develop into a normal, sentient person.

Intuitively, we think that it is worse to bring the anencephalic infant into being than it is to bring the normal infant into being. The justification for this claim is that common-sense morality dictates that a non-conscious, blank life is worse than a normal, fully sentient life that will contain many pains and pleasures. However, the hedonic evaluation principle, which seems to be a straightforward logical consequence of Benatar's view, would seem to dictate otherwise. It would seem to dictate that it is worse to bring the normal infant into existence as opposed to the anencephalic infant. According to this principle, the anencephalic infant was not harmed by coming into existence as much as the normal infant was. It is certainly worse, one would usually think, to bring the anencephalic infant into being.

There are other counter-arguments one might advance against Benatar. Saul Smilansky has recently argued against Benatar's views. Smilansky agrees with Benatar that there are asymmetries between existence and non-existence. However, for Smilansky, these asymmetries do not justify Benatar's conclusions. Smilansky's objection is as follows.

When experiencing a happy and moving occasion (such as visiting a beautiful area) I often regret that people close to me have died, and cannot enjoy the pleasure that I experience. If the region is nearly empty, it would be natural for me to think that it is a pity that more people do not live among all this beauty. The presence of more people would be good...So (I feel) the existence of currently non-existent people would in itself be good. Moreover, just as I am glad to be alive, I think that people who could exist but do not (because they have died or because they were not born) are missing out.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Smilansky, "Better Never to Have Been-David Benatar." Page 570.

Smilansky is also not convinced of the force of Benatar's arguments about the role that adaptive preferences play in our estimates about the quality of our own lives. For Smilansky, just because people value their own existence only because they are "happy idiots," does not mean that this self-deception about existence is relevant (Smilansky 571). Benatar's arguments about adaptive preferences need to be reinforced by a "strong argument why happiness of" the self-deceptive variety "is not happiness enough" (Smilansky 571). People might "get by in life only with the aid of illusions: admittedly, that would not be very noble, but if it makes us happy, why is it so bad" (Smilansky 571)? Smilansky concludes that just because there is evidence "that there is some cognitive and emotional bias affecting people's estimates does not outweigh" the "widespread sense of happiness" that people feel (Smilansky 571).

There are serious problems with Smilansky's replies. To begin, in his first argument, Smilansky states that when we experience an emotionally provocative experience (e.g., the experience of nature), we regret that people who have been close to us and have died cannot enjoy the experience. It is quite common and rational to wish that people who are missing out on life's pleasures would not be missing out. However, Smilansky takes this claim one step further when he states that it is also natural to wish that more previously non-existent people be able to enjoy the experience in question. He then concludes that the existence of currently non-existent people would be good in itself.

As I stated above, Smilansky's first claim seems to be rational enough. However, I object to his second claim and his conclusion. First, I do not think that Smilansky's counter-argument is even valid. There seems to be a suppressed premise in the argument; namely, that it is good to bring into existence people who have a certain quality of life.

Smilansky is not just arguing that it would be good for any type of person to exist. Rather, his argument requires that a certain type of person exist; that is, the type of person who can contemplate and appreciate beauty and enjoy certain things. His argument does not extend to bringing into existence people who are severely depressed or severely cognitively impaired. Although he does not explicitly say so, Smilansky has a very specific type of individual in mind.

Second, I think that Smilansky's second claim is false. He thinks that upon experiencing a moving occasion, like viewing a beautiful natural landscape, it makes sense for one to wish that more people were present to experience it. This seems strange. Is it not the remoteness and untouched beauty of nature that we find so compelling? It seems odd to desire that more people "live among" a beautiful natural landscape. Perhaps Smilansky picked the wrong example. The occasion of experiencing a beautiful piece of music might have been a better example. Upon hearing a beautiful piece of music, perhaps it is natural to want others to experience it as well. This might be true, although I disagree. My response is very intuitive, as is Smilansky's claim, so I will not press the issue. I will state only that I do not feel the force of Smilansky's claim because I think there is an aspect of the appreciation of beauty that is private. Upon hearing a beautiful piece of music, one might not want others around to experience it. Perhaps nobody else could appreciate it in the same way or to the same degree that one does.<sup>11</sup> This seems to be perfectly natural. Yet, as I said, I will not press this response.

I have other problems with Smilansky's counter-argument. First, his counter-argument would seem to suggest that we should bring as many people into existence as

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<sup>11</sup> One might reasonably object that it would be good for other individuals to exist as well. This would have tremendous force especially if such individuals would be able to appreciate beauty in a different way. However, to answer this objection would constitute too much of a digression.



possible. According to Smilansky, the more people there are to enjoy beauty, the better the state of affairs. As I stated above, Smilansky's argument demands that we bring people into existence with a certain level of well-being. Now I want to suggest that this level of well-being might be very low. So low, in fact, that his counter-argument ends up being highly counter-intuitive. Smilansky's argument demands that we bring people into existence that are able to appreciate beauty. Notice, though, that the cognitive and emotional abilities needed in order to lead a life in which one is capable of experiencing and appreciating such beauty are quite minimal. As long as one does not bring into existence a person who is totally miserable or comatose, then, according to Smilansky, the more people of this sort the better. It would be morally acceptable, and even good, to bring into existence people who were mildly or moderately cognitively impaired, who will lead lives plagued by life-long incontinence, or who will lead relatively short lives and therefore die young. It certainly seems wrong to bring these sorts of individuals into existence. Smilansky's argument seems to suffer from highly counter-intuitive consequences.<sup>12</sup>

There is one last problem I will address related to Smilansky's argument. He thinks that Benatar lacks an argument for the thesis that being "happy idiots" is not enough. Smilansky wonders why having illusions about the quality of one's life is so bad. The answer should be obvious. Most of us have chosen to pursue philosophy because we are dedicated to seeking out and disseminating the truth. Smilansky suggests that it would be good for there to be a schizophrenic society in which some people know

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<sup>12</sup> Smilansky might reply that his argument only establishes a *prima facie* reason to bring people into existence. Furthermore, he could state that this reason can be outweighed in cases by other reasons especially when one is considering bringing into existence an individual whose quality of life is comparatively low. However, without having a clear sense of what such countervailing reasons might be, this response will be difficult to evaluate. Therefore, I will set it aside.

the truth about existence and others are kept from it or are allowed to ignore it. Smilansky might find this non-traditional understanding of philosophical endeavour appealing, but the vast majority of individuals, including myself, will find it troubling.<sup>13</sup>

Even though Smilansky's counter-arguments are not convincing, there are other problems with Benatar's argument. Benatar never explicitly states so, but, as I suggested above, he tacitly seems to advocate a brand of hedonism. He seems to identify harms and benefits, and therefore quality of life more generally, with the enjoyment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. There is little textual evidence to suggest otherwise.<sup>14</sup>

The above fact leaves Benatar open to some important objections. If what I have said above is correct, then Benatar identifies harms and benefits with mental states. There are some replies that should be considered. Following certain higher-order thought (HOT) theorists such as Carruthers and Rosenthal, one might argue that there is nothing that it is like to have a pain unless the pain itself is phenomenally conscious. Rosenthal argues, for instance, that "what it's like for one to have a pain, in the relevant sense of that idiom, is simply what it's like for one to be conscious of having that pain" (Rosenthal 412). Therefore, "there won't be anything it's like to have a pain unless the pain is conscious" (Rosenthal 412). According to HOT theories, some creatures will not be phenomenally conscious because they lack the requisite cognitive architecture.

One very strange consequence of this would be that non-phenomenally conscious creatures would most definitely include fetuses, infants, nearly all non-humans, and

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<sup>13</sup> It might be possible to reply that not every philosopher has the intuition that truth is valuable. This, one might argue, does not show that truth is sufficiently valuable to outweigh the value of being a "happy idiot."

<sup>14</sup> In what follows, I argue against Benatar by objecting to hedonism. However, Benatar might just as well have based his view on, e.g., preferentism. The point is, though, that Benatar does not base his view on another axiology. The fact that Benatar seems to advocate hedonism raises problems for him. In this section, I will discuss some of these problems and how they impact his conclusions.

some cognitively impaired individuals. First, it would then seem that for many creatures (such as humans) one is harmed by existence not by being conceived but, rather, at some point in one's normal development. Secondly, and most important, Benatar's view would then entail the conclusion that many cognitively impaired individuals were not harmed by coming into existence. Oddly enough, we generally think that coming into existence harms these individuals the most. Benatar's view may have some very counter-intuitive consequences.<sup>15</sup>

Benatar never explains what he means by the terms "pain" and "pleasure." It does seem reasonable to assume that he equates the term "pain" with physical pain. If this is the case, then I think that Benatar's view is overly simplified. Benatar's claim that pain is bad is false. Consider masochists, for example. These individuals get pleasure from sensations that others would consider painful. The point is that it is not invariably the case that pain is bad. Indeed, for some individuals in certain circumstances, pain might be a good thing.<sup>16</sup>

I will advance a further challenge to Benatar's claim that the presence of pain is bad. Perhaps pain may be bad for most creatures. However, it may prove to be far too myopic to focus on pain. As I stated above, one can suffer serious harms and yet not be

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<sup>15</sup> Another counter-argument against Benatar is that there is a way of being harmed without being in a corresponding mental state. When one is lied to by a friend, for instance, one is certainly harmed, yet one need not be in any corresponding mental state in order for one to suffer such a harm. One need not even be aware of the fact that one has been lied to by a friend. Thomas Nagel has advanced a similar view. According to Nagel, some evils are not directly attributable to intrinsic states of affairs. That is, some goods and evils can be relational in nature and not intrinsic features of the person who suffers or benefits. Certain goods and evils may be attributable to a person's life-history or potentialities, for example. While a subject can be given a unique spatio-temporal location, "the same is not necessarily true of the goods and ills that befall him" (Nagel 77). Therefore, an individual can suffer ills in a relational sense when they are clearly not in a position to recognize them. However, I will concede that this is a very controversial argument.

<sup>16</sup> The above criticism is parallel to another, widely discussed criticism of hedonism in the literature. That is, mental states might matter differently to different people. See Peter Sandoe's article "Quality of Life—Three Competing Views." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2: 11-23, 1999.

in a pain-state at all. There seems to be a conceptual non-equivalence of suffering and bodily pain.<sup>17</sup> It seems that suffering is also bad. Thus, by focusing on physical pain Benatar has made a considerable error. One may be suffering terribly and, yet, may not be experiencing any physical pain or even the slightest bit of physical discomfort. This is the case when people are severely clinically depressed, when people suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome, or in cases where one is racked by intense guilt. Guilt, depression and mental illness all make one's life less good. Yet, one need not be in any physical pain when experiencing such suffering. Alternatively, one may be experiencing considerable pain and yet not be suffering. Consider, for example, two consenting adults engaging in sadomasochistic sex.

I do not want to spend too much time defining the term "suffering." A definition of suffering might be as follows: *Suffering may or may not include physical pain. Yet suffering must include emotional and/or mental distress such that the distress in question prohibits one from living one's life in a normal and/or gratifying manner.* I claim that suffering includes an inability to engage in activities that one cares about or, in some cases, which are necessary for one's survival. Notice that this definition has the merit that it will cover cases where one is experiencing emotional trauma and physical pain, cases where one is simply experiencing extreme physical pain, and cases where one is both in physical pain and emotional distress. However, I will not spend more time pursuing this tangential point.

I have another problem with Benatar's view that pain is bad. True, the *type* pain may be bad. However, there may be *token* instances of pain that may not be bad or, perhaps, even good.

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Hanna has addressed this issue in an unpublished essay, "What Is it Like to Be a Bat in Pain?"

For example, pain (and suffering) can in many cases provide us with a context out of which we bring about greater goods. Without pain and suffering there would be no prospect for altruism or courage. Pain and suffering also have extrinsic properties. Many token instances of pain and suffering provide us with motivation and drive us to excel. To the degree that some suffering has great *opportunity costs* for us<sup>18</sup>, some suffering also has *opportunity gains*. However, not all pain and suffering is thus. Much pain and suffering is gratuitous and befalls people in undeserved and tragic amounts.

The above analysis would seem to apply equally well to pleasure. The presence of pleasure is not always good. For example, at some point in the future, there might be pleasure machines available for widespread human use. These machines might operate by stimulating the necessary parts of one's brain (probably the hypothalamus) in order to bring about intense pleasure. A life spent connected to such a machine would not seem worthwhile or well spent at all. Indeed, such a life might be one of the worst lives imaginable. Such a scenario would provide one with absolute pleasure to the exclusion of everything else. True, one would be excluding harms. However, some of those harms, as stated above, drive us to overcome them and in so doing we are able to act morally, courageously, and/or altruistically. Such a life would be devoid of achievement and morality. Pleasure, like pain, has opportunity costs. A life of perpetual pleasure would be devoid of character building and moral achievement.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, consider the kind of pleasure that some warped people get when they watch child pornography. Such images might generate a great deal of pleasure for some

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<sup>18</sup> Suffering can eliminate our ability to engage in the activities we enjoy. Therefore, there is an extrinsic aspect to the badness of suffering. Jeff McMahan (2001) has made similar remarks bearing on this issue.

<sup>19</sup> The intuitions I appeal to here are controversial indeed. However, they may be sufficiently widespread in order to render the argument acceptable.

psychologically and morally warped individuals. However, one would not wish to call the presence of such pleasure “good.” Benatar does not acknowledge that there are different sorts of pleasure; rather, he simply groups them all into the same category.

The above points up the fact that it is difficult to apply evaluative terms to properties such as intelligence, suffering, or pleasure irrespective of their context. Pain and suffering can be bad and pleasure can be good. However, they are not *invariably* so. Indeed, it seems to be the case that, often times, the best scenario involves the *right* balance of pain (and possibly suffering) and pleasure.

I conclude that Benatar’s view is flawed. Pain and pleasure are not the best exemplars of harms and benefits. This is because (a) the presence of pain can be good (or not bad) for the individual who is experiencing it (e.g., masochists or non-phenomenally conscious individuals), (b) one might not be in pain and yet may be the subject of serious harms (e.g., when one is suffering), and (c) pain and pleasure have extrinsic properties that cannot be ignored.

I stated above that while the type pain/suffering may be bad, there might be token instances that are perhaps good. In a sense, Benatar’s argument does not rely on his claims about pain/suffering or pleasure. Benatar only used pains and pleasures as “exemplars” of harms and benefits. Benatar may attempt to circumvent my counter-arguments by concentrating on harms and benefits as opposed to entering into discussions about pain, suffering and pleasure.

However, this will not suffice. For Benatar to place all harms into the same category and call them “bad” is indeed a category error (just as it would be to do the same in the case of pains and pleasures). Some harms have *opportunity gains* for the

individuals who experience them. Others, however, have greater opportunity costs relative to their opportunity gains. Still, other harms are simply horrendous evils and should never (one usually thinks) befall anyone. In other words, not all harms are equally bad, so one should not group them together. One should not group together the instances of the brutal rape, abduction and prolonged torture of a ten-year-old girl with an artist battling mild depression that has a positive affect on his work. Benatar could divide the harms that have positive extrinsic properties (opportunity gains) from the harms that do not. Some harms are good for something and some harms are horrendous and are devoid of right-making properties (i.e., they are gratuitous). It is the latter sort that drives the substance of Benatar's conclusion.

From the above, I conclude that Benatar's argument is not sound. This is due to the fact that it contains a false premise; namely, the presence of pain is bad and the presence of pleasure is good.

Perhaps one of my counter-arguments is not sound. It might be the case that I have ignored the important distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value. It is one thing, one might respond, to claim, as I have, that pains can be instrumentally good. For example, a certain painful sensation might lead to other good things. One might wonder whether pain could be intrinsically good. Benatar might grant my conclusion that there are token instances of pain that have instrumental value and therefore lead to other good things. Yet, he may contend that all instances of pain are intrinsically bad and all instances of pleasure are intrinsically good.

Perhaps the above response will not save Benatar's argument. In his article, "The Intrinsic Goodness of Pain, Anguish, and the Loss of Pleasure," Patrick Yarnell argues

that there are some instances of pain and the loss of pleasure that are intrinsically good. In order to appreciate Yarnell's argument, consider variants on three examples he uses to illustrate his point:

*The Sorrowful Friend.* John has just received word that his best friend has died in an automobile accident. John is overcome with grief. However, John's other friend, Mary, offers John a drug. This drug has no adverse side-effects and will leave his memories of his friend intact. Yet, taking the drug will permanently relieve John's intense sorrow without any feelings of guilt for doing so.

*The Pianist.* Tom is playing the piano. He is deeply moved by the poignancy of the music he is playing. Again, Mary offers Tom the anti-grief drug. The drug will allow him to enjoy the music without feeling the least bit sad or melancholic.

*The Sadist.* Harry has a psychological quirk such that he enjoys watching kittens being tortured to death. Although he does not actually participate and is not a violent person, he still enjoys the spectacle. Harry realizes that his reaction to tortured kittens is inappropriate and desires to rid himself of the desire to see kittens tortured. Mary offers Harry a pill that will allow him to enjoy the spectacle of kittens being tortured without any moral qualms or guilt. The pill will allow him not to give up the pleasure he experiences when he watches kittens being tortured.

Now, many people would think, Yarnell claims, that it would be strange for the individuals in these cases to take the pills that Mary offers them. Yarnell thinks that in certain circumstances "it is rational to intrinsically desire evils such as emotional anguish and the loss of pleasure" (Yarnell 453). John intrinsically desires "to suffer the sadness inspired by the loss of a friend" (Yarnell 453). "To be a friend," Yarnell claims, "is, among other things, to intrinsically care for the well-being of the other individual. Intrinsically caring for another essentially involves a certain disposition, the disposition to experience sorrow at the other's serious misfortune" (Yarnell 454). Most people, Yarnell thinks, would refuse to take Mary's pill. For the pianist, "if he is like most of us," he "would intrinsically value the poignancy of the music itself and listen to it" no matter how sad it made him feel (Yarnell 451). To listen to sombre music "without



feeling sad would be to miss the point entirely” (Yarnell 451). As for the sadist, it is very improbable that he would see taking Mary’s pill “as a solution to” his problem (Yarnell 452). The loss of pleasure, “in this case, seems desirable” (Yarnell 452). Yarnell concludes that pain and a “loss of pleasure, then, are, at least in certain situations, intrinsically desirable. If what is intrinsically desirable is intrinsically good, then pain, anguish, and the loss of pleasure are, in some cases, intrinsically good” (Yarnell 453).

What, if anything, is wrong with Yarnell’s argument? The fundamental flaw, I suspect, is the antecedent of the following conditional: “If what is intrinsically desirable is intrinsically good, then pain, anguish, and the loss of pleasure are, in some cases, intrinsically good” (Yarnell 453). It is not clear that anything that what is desirable for its own sake is also good in and of itself. This is a bold claim, one that is not given any support.<sup>20</sup> Yarnell has not provided any reason to think that there is a strong connection between something’s being intrinsically good and its being desired for its own sake. Even though Yarnell did not provide an argument for the thesis that anything that is desirable for its own sake is intrinsically good does not mean that there is not one. I admit that I have no idea what such an argument would look like. Despite this flaw, Yarnell’s examples might still be instructive.

I think that the example of the pianist fails to show that the emotional pain experienced by the listener is the whole story. It seems more reasonable to suppose that, in cases of this sort, the cathartic experience of the listener is inextricably connected with another, pleasurable experience associated with the music itself. True, the mood of the music is sombre and it induces a specific emotional response in the listener. However,

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, Yarnell has reported to me that he did not have any support in mind for this claim. The reason is that at the time he wrote the article, he was uncommitted to the claim that what is intrinsically desirable is intrinsically good. In the context of this article, he would like the conditional to be taken “at face value”.

the music itself also has a certain structure. There are also tonal relationships between the notes that the listener will undoubtedly find pleasurable. Good music, the kind of music that can elicit a powerful emotional response, must also sound good; it must be pleasing to the ear. It seems as though Yarnell has conveniently ignored the pleasurable aesthetic aspect that is essential to the experience of listening to sad music.

In order to illustrate my point, consider the following scenario. Imagine that there exists a machine that can stimulate the necessary parts of one's brain in order to produce extremely vivid emotional "hallucinations." When one is connected to this negative experience machine, one can experience a variety of different emotions. For example, one could experience the emotions that one would feel in cases of extreme sadness like those brought on by the death of one's child. In such a case one would become inconsolable and emotionally crushed.

Now, it seems clear to me that anyone who would choose to connect oneself to this negative experience machine would have to be quite deranged. Possibly only masochists or the intensely bored would choose to experience such emotions for recreation. I think that this scenario illustrates the flaw in Yarnell's reasoning that I discussed above. It does not seem as though we listen to sad music only because it makes us feel depressed. Listening to sad music is not like the negative experience machine. We crave the experience of listening to sad music not only because we want to feel the emotions associated with it but, also, because the music sounds *good*.<sup>21</sup> The case of the pianist does not prove Yarnell's point.

I think that there are also problems with the case of the sorrowful friend. First, I

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<sup>21</sup> Oddly, Yarnell suggests that he might deny this claim. On page 452 he states that "It is not clear that the aesthetic experience in the case of especially poignant music is a sort of pleasure."

am not sure that everyone would have the intuitions upon which this case depends. Some individuals may not see any value in the bereavement process. Such individuals may opt to take Mary's pill. If one does not have the intuitions that Yarnell thinks one would have about this case, there would seem to be little he could say in response. However, I would concede that such intuitions would be quite rare.

There are other reasons why someone might opt to take Mary's pill even if they did see value in the bereavement process. For example, someone might have recently experienced the loss of many close relatives and she might justifiably feel that the death of her friend might push her over the edge. For such an individual, taking the pill would seem justifiable. Despite the above claims, I think that it is safe to say that, other things being equal, *most* people would not take the pill.

Secondly, Yarnell thinks that he can circumvent the challenge that people would be motivated by guilt not to take the pill by stipulating that the pill would prevent one's feeling guilty about taking it. However, this might not be enough to save Yarnell's argument. Many people, I suspect, might be hesitant to take the pill because they would suffer from higher-order guilt. That is, they might feel guilty about not feeling guilty and would therefore not take Mary's pill. This suggestion seems reasonable enough. Such higher-order guilt might motivate some people to take half of Mary's pill, thereby suffering only half the anguish and emotional distress of their loss. If this suggestion is plausible, there may be a serious flaw with the scenario in question.

What about the case of the sadist? This is equally pressing for the issue at hand. Recall that Benatar argued that the presence of pain is bad and that the presence of pleasure is good. In order to circumvent my counter-arguments, he might suggest that

pain is intrinsically bad and that pleasure is intrinsically good. However, if pleasure is intrinsically a good thing, then the loss or cessation of it must be bad. Even though it remains doubtful that Yarnell's argument gets him the conclusion that pain is intrinsically good, it still may be the case that the loss of pleasure is good. This would pose significant problems for Benatar.

Despite the remarks I made concerning the intrinsic goodness of pain, I actually find the case of the sadist to be compelling. My own arguments against Benatar appeal to similar ideas. It seems that the case of the sadist does not depend upon the suspect antecedent of Yarnell's conditional.<sup>22</sup> There does not seem to be any worry with appealing to common-sense moral intuitions in this case and ignoring Yarnell's possibly defective antecedent. Common-sense suggests that it is a good thing for the sadist not to take Mary's pill and to rid himself of the pleasure of watching kittens being tortured to death. If an appeal to common-sense moral intuitions can save Yarnell's argument, as I think it can, then the loss of pleasure can be a good thing.

After considering Yarnell's arguments, I have concluded that I should distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental value. While pain can have instrumental value, it is doubtful that it is intrinsically valuable. However, I believe, as I suggested in the body of my original response to Benatar and after considering Yarnell's case of the sadist, that the loss of pleasure can be intrinsically good. If the loss of pleasure can be intrinsically good, then it is difficult to see how Benatar's claim that the presence of pleasure is good can be true. This fact, along with the other concerns I raised about Benatar's argument, strongly suggests that there still seem to be significant problems with Benatar's view.

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<sup>22</sup> Recall that Yarnell never provided an argument as to why we should accept the antecedent of the following conditional: "If what is intrinsically desirable is intrinsically good, then pain, anguish, and the loss of pleasure are, in some cases, intrinsically good."

## V.

In this chapter I have discussed a range of possible positions one might take on the morality of causing people to exist. Arguments for the thesis that we have moral obligations to bring others into existence were seen to be extremely inadequate. There were also serious problems that faced arguments for the thesis that we have moral obligations to refrain from bringing people into existence. Arguments for the claim that procreation is neither entirely obligatory nor entirely impermissible were also seen to be problematic. In subsequent chapters I will set out and defend my own theory concerning the morality of bringing others into existence. My objective is that this theory will circumvent many of the problems that faced the theories in this chapter.

## Chapter Two

### I.

In this and following chapters I will attempt to answer the questions I set out in the introduction. As I stated there, I am primarily interested in determining what the value of a person's life is. In order to do this, I need to make some assumptions and discuss my methodology. In this chapter, therefore, I will set out and explain some preliminary assumptions that I will need in order to advance my argument. I will begin by presenting some background material.

### II.

The view that I am working with is that there is a neutral zone of existence.<sup>1</sup> Living a life within this zone means that one has a neutral life. It is neither better nor worse for a person to live in this zone. If a person lives a life within this zone, then it is equally good for her to exist than not to exist.

If an individual's life has positive value and not neutral value, then her life is better lived than not lived and is above the upper limit of neutrality. If it is better for such an individual to live than not, then surely others are under a certain amount of moral pressure to ensure that the person does live. For consequentialists, this moral pressure would presumably extend to an obligation to bring such a person into existence.

If a person's net level of well-being is below the neutral zone, a life with negative value, then her life is better not lived than lived. It is always worse for a person to live below the bottom limit of neutrality than not. If a person's well-being is negative, then it would have been better for such an individual not to have ever come into existence. In

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<sup>1</sup> John Broome and Gregory Kavka use a similar concept.

such a case, others would be under a certain amount of moral pressure to make sure that such an individual never comes into existence.

I will take the above framework one step further. If a person's life has negative overall value and therefore it would have been better not to have been brought into existence, then I will say that this person was harmed by being brought into existence. To say that it is worse for a person to exist than not, is simply to say that the person is harmed by existing. In the case of a person with an overall lifetime well-being that is positive, a person whose well-being places her above the neutral level, one would say that the person was benefited by being brought into existence.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, in a case where a person's life is neutral, one would say that it is neither better nor worse for them to exist. In such a case, the person is neither harmed nor benefited by existing.

Before proceeding, I will mention one last point. There is clearly a gap between, for example, the claim that being brought into existence is a harm for a person and the much stronger claim that it is morally wrong to bring that person into existence. To address this general problem would require a rather lengthy discussion. Therefore, I will set this issue aside. Some harm may be ethically necessary. This may be true, but I will be arguing within a more simplistic framework. I will be operating under the assumption that it is wrong in any case to bring a person into existence if the person would be harmed by existing.

With the above concepts and preliminary assumptions in place, one can begin to

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<sup>2</sup> I am providing this analysis because I want to make certain that any charge of double-counting will not surface in subsequent chapters. If I argue that a person's life is worse lived than not lived because of the sum total of harm in her life, then I will say that she is harmed by existing. I am not counting these harms twice, however. I do not think that a person is harmed *once* when she is brought into existence, and *then* when she acquires a sum total of negative value in her life. On my view, the harm of having a sum total of negative value in a person's life *is* the harm of existing for that person.

formulate some general views that one might have about the value of existence.<sup>3</sup> These views can be distinguished from one another based upon whether a) the view admits of the existence of a neutral zone and b) what structure the neutral zone should have if it does exist. In order to illustrate the possible views that one might have about the value of existence, consider the following cases:

*The Normal Parents.* A couple are considering having a child. They know that their child will lead a very long, healthy and happy life.

*Genetically Deficient Parents.* A couple are considering having a child. However, they know that their child will be grotesquely deformed and will lead an unhappy life full of intense, unrelenting suffering.

Some people think that it is always better for a person to live than not to live.<sup>4</sup> This is a radically optimistic view about the value of existence.<sup>5</sup> Such an optimist will think that it would be good for *both* sets of parents to have their children. Such an individual would claim that there is no neutrality and thus no life within or below the neutral zone.

There is a variant on the above view. Some might think that it is neither better nor worse that The Genetically Deficient Parents conceive and that The Normal Parents should conceive. Such individuals would hold the view that it is never worse for a person to live than not to live. According to this less optimistic view, we should be indifferent as to whether a person with an extremely bad life comes into existence and that it is a good thing for a person with a good life to come into existence. This is the view that there is a neutral zone and that it has an infinite structure with an upper but not a bottom

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<sup>3</sup> I use the phrases “value of existence” and “value of life” interchangeably in this context.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, in this dissertation when I claim that it is better/worse for a person to exist, what I mean is that “for that person, it is better/worse to live than not.” This value is *relative* to the person herself. In advancing my views, I *do not* mean “*that* the person exists is better/worse than that she does not exist.” This issue will later emerge in the context of DS which I will address in the next section.

<sup>5</sup> Some Catholics and fundamentalist Christians hold versions of this extreme view.



limit.

Others might reject the view that existence can be better or worse in any way for a person and instead would advocate the view that it is always neither better nor worse for a person to live than not to live. This is a view of general indifference. This is the view that neutrality has an infinite structure and that it consists of a zone that is infinitely wide. On this view, it is neither better nor worse that either of the above parents has their child or not. If given a choice between The Genetically Deficient Parents having their child or The Normal Parents having their child, such an individual would be indifferent.<sup>6</sup>

Some individuals think that it is neither better nor worse that The Normal Parents have their child. They think that a person's existence is neutral so long as the person would not have an awful life. So they would claim that The Genetically Deficient Parents would act wrongly in bringing their child into existence. Therefore, some people think that it is never better for a person to live than not to live. According to this view, there is an infinite neutral zone with a bottom but not an upper limit.<sup>7</sup>

Some people think that it is always worse for a person to live than not to live. According to this very pessimistic view both sets of parents would be under obligations not to bring their children into existence. This is the view that no life has neutral or positive value. All lives on this view have negative value.<sup>8</sup>

There is one last view I will discuss which unifies elements of these views. Some people would hold the view that it can be better, worse, and neither better nor worse for a

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<sup>6</sup> It would be possible for there to be constraints placed on this indifference. Some might argue that, once a set of parents have decided to have their child, they should have a child with the better life. In other words, a person might favour more fine-grained distinctions at the level of same-number choices than at the level of different-number choices.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Narveson (1967) is the main proponent of this view.

<sup>8</sup> In practice, Christoph Fehige (1998) and David Benatar (1997) hold versions of this view.

person to live. These people would accept the view that if a child would have a great life, then it is better for her to live than not. The view would also suggest that there are neutral lives. However, the structure of the neutral zone is up for debate. A neutral range is just as compatible with a single neutral level on this view. Yet, either way, neutrality must have limits so whatever structure this view imposes on neutrality, it cannot be infinite. Such an individual would also accept the conclusion that we are under a certain amount of pressure to ensure that people whose lives are not worth living do not come into existence.

The above views exhaust the range of possible views that I will discuss about the value of life. The following is a summary of these views expressed in terms of goodness.

1. Unrestricted Optimism: It is always better for a person to live than not to live.
2. Restricted Optimism: It is never worse for a person to live than not to live.
3. General Indifference: It is always neither better nor worse for a person to live than not to live.
4. Restricted Pessimism: It is never better for a person to live than not to live.
5. Unrestricted Pessimism: It is always worse for a person to live than not to live.
6. The Unified View: It can be better, worse or neither better nor worse for a person to live than not to live.

I will leave it an open question as to whether there are other views one could hold about the value of existence. I think there might be. In particular, there might be refinements of the view I have called “General Indifference.” However, I will not discuss this issue. It is also important to note that I have formulated these principles axiologically. That is, I have formulated them in terms of goodness. It would also be possible to formulate these principles in deontic terms.

In the introduction of this dissertation, I stated that I wanted to know how good or bad a person’s life is. I also stated that I wanted to know how good or bad a world is. There are mappings from the above principles to judgments about the comparison of the

value of empty and non-empty worlds. The views could be summarized as follows:

7. Unrestricted Optimism: A non-empty world is always better than an empty world.
8. Restricted Optimism: A non-empty world is never worse than an empty world.
9. General Indifference: A non-empty world is always equally good as an empty world.
10. Restricted Pessimism: A non-empty world is never better than an empty world.
11. Unrestricted Pessimism: A non-empty world is always worse than an empty world.
12. The Unified View: A non-empty world can be better, worse or equally good as an empty world.

Again, there might be other views that one could have about the value of worlds. Also, in keeping with the previous list, the above views are formulated in terms of goodness.

By far the most attractive and widespread view is Restricted Pessimism. This is the view that most people hold, even if they are unaware of it. Returning to the two cases discussed above, most people think that it is neither good nor bad if The Normal Parents have their child. Yet, people will also claim that if The Genetically Deficient Parents have their child, then this is morally problematic. Most people are not neutral about the creation of lives that fall below a minimum standard of well-being; they are against it. These are rather common beliefs. Restricted pessimism seems to be the view most closely allied with common-sense, pre-theoretical intuitions.<sup>9</sup>

The view I will defend in this chapter will be a version of The Unified View. However, in practice, I will argue that Unrestricted Pessimism is the correct view. Theoretically speaking, I do think that there is a neutral zone and that it has a finite structure. However, I also think that no *actual* human life is above the lower limit of neutrality. My view leaves open the possibility that there is a lower limit of neutrality which humans never reach.

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<sup>9</sup> John Broome has called this “the intuition of neutrality.” See *Weighing Lives* pages 143ff.

### III.

Common-sense dictates that it is good to be benefited and bad to be harmed. What, one might ask, constitute harms and benefits? In answering this question, one could advocate a variety of different theories of well-being. In this dissertation I will not argue for the truth of one theory of well-being over another. This would constitute too much of a digression. Instead, my official position will be that I am uncommitted to the truth of any one theory of well-being. For my purposes, it does not matter, for example, whether the goods of life are pleasures or satisfied preferences. Therefore, I will base my view on the disjunction of hedonism and preferentism. However, even though I am basing my view on the disjunction of these two axiologies, I will be *expressing* my conclusions and arguments in the language of preferentism. Preferentism certainly has a long and varied philosophical history.<sup>10</sup> Yet, nothing I will argue for in this and subsequent chapters depends upon the truth of *only* preferentism. The reader should note that I could just have easily adopted hedonism.

I am basing my view on the disjunction of preferentism and hedonism. Yet, I have chosen to express my views in the language of preferentism. One could hold a wide-variety of views within the broad category of preference-based axiologies. A moderate and widespread version of this axiology is known as satisfactionism or desire

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<sup>10</sup> I am fully aware that this assumption is controversial. Plato's Socrates, for example, seeks to demolish it in the *Gorgias*. Similar arguments are advanced in Appendix I of Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*. Some imaginative arguments have also been advanced by Fehige. In order to argue against the view that extra satisfied preferences benefit a person, Fehige uses the example of a man, named John, who has been infected with a fatal virus. The man's doctor congratulates John and says that it is good that John has the fatal virus because, the man's doctor says, "the virus you've caught has another effect as well. Next week or so, you will begin to develop an immense desire that after your death ten tons of pink foam rubber be deposited in your front garden. I will see to that right after your burial, and your health insurance will pay for it. Of course, your death will frustrate some other wishes of yours...death will also deprive you of the value of all the satisfied extra preferences you would have developed had you not caught the fatal virus. But I assure you that all those wishes together are not as strong as the satisfied extra one that is in store for you, the one for pink foam rubber" (Fehige 514). Even though John's doctor congratulates him, John, Fehige thinks, "has little reason to rejoice" (Fehige 514).

satisfactionism. According to this view, it is good to have a satisfied preference. That is, it is of more value that a preference is satisfied than that it never exists. I will adopt desire satisfactionism. The core assumption I will employ can be expressed as follows:

Desire Satisfactionism (DS): Given a person, *p*, it is *ceteris paribus* good if both of the following states of affairs hold: *p* wants it to be the case that *x*, at time *t* and with strength *s*, and *x* is the case.<sup>11</sup>

Having a preference satisfied is a good thing and contributes to the positive value of the preference bearer's life.

If one accepts DS, then one will find the following asymmetry plausible:

1. If *p* wants it to be the case that *x*, then it is good that *x*, *ceteris paribus*.
2. If *p* wants it to be the case that *x*, then it is bad that  $\sim x$ , *ceteris paribus*.

The above asymmetry says that it is good that people get what they want and bad if they do not get what they want. This is a very compelling picture. Later I will have to make some modifications to it, but for now the above should suffice.

The last preliminary assumption that I need to make is that there is no personal immortality. If there is personal immortality, then one might argue that the harms one experiences in this life are compensated by a desirable immortality. The issue at stake here often emerges in philosophy of religion in connection with discussions of the problem of evil.<sup>12</sup> Without my assumption concerning personal immortality, an opponent can easily make use of the notion of an afterlife in order to gain an unfair strategic advantage.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that DS, as I will be employing the assumption, concerns what is good *for a person* and not what is good *simpliciter*.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, John Hick claims that life is a "soul-making" process, the purpose of which is to transform individuals from an unsatisfactory, self-centred state into a superior, reality-centred one. See *Evil and the God of Love*. London: MacMillan/Palgrave Press, 2007.

#### IV.

I will now introduce an important principle. I will not offer knock-down arguments against rival principles nor will I argue for its truth. I will only argue that it is a highly intuitive principle with great *prima facie* appeal. The principle in question is this:

*The Person-Affecting Principle* (PAP): Something cannot be good or bad if it does not affect a person for better or worse.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, this principle states that right and wrong depend entirely upon effects on persons.

The original source of the person-affecting principle can be found in Jan Narveson's seminal paper, "Utilitarianism and New Generations." Narveson claims that "In deciding what we are to do, the only consideration which is morally relevant...is how others would be affected. If we cannot envisage effects on certain people which would ensue from our acts, then we have no moral material to work on and we can do as we like" (Narveson 63).

In order to proceed in developing my argument, I need to make an assumption regarding the issue of when a person comes into existence. If not, then I will not be able to make sense of the person-affecting principle and I will not be able to develop my theory. Given my commitment to DS, it would be natural for me to claim that only those creatures who are capable of having preferences are persons. This is the claim that I will make. However, I do not want to commit myself to a stronger claim than I need. Therefore, I will make the assumption that a person comes into existence when the

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<sup>13</sup> This is, of course, sometimes referred to as "The Slogan."

person's brain can generate preferences and that this occurs approximately when an individual's brain becomes capable of supporting conscious mental states.<sup>14</sup>

I will not attempt define the term 'consciousness' here. Nor will I discuss the issue of at what stage in a conscious creature's normal development it acquires the ability to have preferences. Neither will I discuss what sort of conscious mental states a creature must have in order for it to have preferences.

In an attempt to make my view as palatable and simple as possible, I will assume that the domain of persons includes any creature that has had at least one preference. If there is no mind present in an object and thus no preferences, then *ceteris paribus* we can have no moral obligations toward the object. An object with no preferences does not exist within the domain of moral patients. All normal adult human and most adult non-humans are persons and all normal human and most non-human children and infants are persons. I will also assume that all normal human and normal non-human late-term foetuses are capable of having preferences and should be included within the domain of moral patients as well.<sup>15</sup>

I want to make it clear that my version of the person-affecting principle is very inclusive. I am doing this mostly for the sake of brevity and simplicity. A person is a creature who is alive and whose brain is capable of supporting conscious mental states that are sophisticated enough to support the existence of preferences. Therefore, no

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, the ability to have preferences might develop some time after a creature becomes conscious. However, I want to settle the issue in a very general way. I am claiming that consciousness is a necessary condition for a person to have preferences, yet it might not be a sufficient condition. I assume that the ability to have preferences emerges at around the same time a creature becomes conscious. This is the very minimal claim I want to make.

<sup>15</sup> My inclusion of many non-humans in the domain of persons should not be too controversial. Empirically speaking, this seems to be a solid claim. As Carruthers states, "there is a case for thinking that beliefs and desires are *very* widely distributed throughout the animal kingdom." Carruthers, "Suffering without Subjectivity" page 11.

metaphysically merely possible “person” is a person and no living creature whose brain is not, or never has been, capable of supporting preferences is a person either. The latter group would include fertilized ova and anencephalic infants, for example.

One might wonder where the issue of abortion stands according to PAP. This principle is clearly not opposed to any abortion that occurs before the end of the second trimester of pregnancy.<sup>16</sup> The issue could be settled quite easily in any case. If the foetus has no preferences, then it is not a person and there is *ceteris paribus* no moral obligation.

There is an alternative to the person-affecting view. One might argue for an impersonal view. On such a view, one might argue that the impermissibility of certain actions has nothing to do with harms to individuals. Rather, the impermissibility of an action is explainable in terms of whether the world will be better or worse if the action is performed. On such a view, the world could be *impersonally* better if an action is not performed.

I will not offer arguments against the impersonal view. However, I will point out that it seems to be at variance with common-sense morality. An advocate of such a view would need to explain how an action could be wrong if it does not affect a preferer for better or worse.<sup>17</sup>

## V.

My view is that persons are those individuals that have had *at least* one preference in their mental history. It does not matter whether the preference was satisfied or how

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<sup>16</sup> It is probably the case that the earliest point at which human consciousness is possible is around the twentieth week of pregnancy. See McMahan, page 267.

<sup>17</sup> Many I suspect hold such views because of the reputed inability of harm-based accounts to handle non-identity cases. There are two problems with this position. First, just because harm-based accounts have difficulty in handling non-identity cases does not mean an impersonalist account is correct. Secondly, it is not clear that a person-affecting view cannot handle such cases.



rudimentary or solitary it was. One solitary preference is a person-making characteristic by itself. This means that merely possible persons are not persons and are thus not moral patients. Even though possible preferrers do not have moral weight, my view does not imply that possible preferences do not have moral weight. I claim that it is not actual preferences by themselves that are morally relevant but, rather, that it is the desires, actual or possible, of preferrers that are morally relevant. My view is that while preferences make the person, the person makes morality.

There is a view that is different from mine. The view states that it is only the actual preferences a person has that matter.<sup>18</sup> There are problems with this view.

Consider the following example. Tom is walking down the street one day when a spontaneous blast of Z-radiation instantly and painlessly renders Tom unconscious at time  $t_1$ . Tom is now in a deep coma. However, Tom is very peculiar in that all of his preferences at time  $t_1$  were satisfied and he had no preferences for the future or for the present. We also know that if he awakes from his coma, then at  $t_2$  Tom will form many new satisfied preferences relating to his present and future states.<sup>19</sup> The catch is that Tom will not awake from his coma on his own. Tom needs the Z-radiation antidote that only his doctor can provide. If, for some reason, his doctor does not give him the antidote, then Tom will remain in his coma until he dies.

Now, if one holds that only actual preferences matter, then it seems to be the case that the tremendous amount of good that Tom would have in his future life does not constitute a reason to give him the Z-radiation antidote. Furthermore, it does not seem to be the case that Tom is harmed by not being given the antidote. How could he be harmed

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<sup>18</sup> My discussion in this section owes a great deal to section seven of Holtug's "On the Value of Coming Into Existence."

<sup>19</sup> This is parallel to Holtug's Buddhist case.

by being denied these future goods? His future preferences are not actual, but rather, they are possible and therefore, just like possible preferers, not objects of moral concern. This conclusion, however, seems too bizarre to be correct. Surely the amount of good that he would be expected to have in his life is a good enough reason by itself to give him the antidote.

The above example points up an important problem for the individual who considers actual preferences to be the only objects of direct moral concern. However, the account that I am advocating can handle the above example. The account I am advocating tells us that it is seriously wrong not to give Tom the antidote. My account tells us that the doctor should give Tom the antidote because it would be wrong to deprive Tom of a future with possible preferences that will be satisfied. I have identified personhood with the possession of preferences.<sup>20</sup> So, while only persons have preferences, the preferences that are ethically relevant do not all need to be actual, they can be possible preferences. My view can be expressed as follows:

Person-Centred Preferentialism (PCP):

- (i) Persons are creatures who have had at least one preference.
- (ii) A person can be the subject of both actual preferences and possible preferences.
- (iii) Both types of preferences are ethically relevant.

I think that PCP is much more reasonable than the rival view discussed above. However, I will refrain from saying more about PCP.

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<sup>20</sup> I have stated that I have identified personhood with the possession of preferences. Some might think that I have identified personhood with the capacity *to have* preferences. This is wrong. It is wrong, that is, so long as “capacity” means something like “potential” or “ability.” Surely, we do not award moral status purely on the basis of the capacity or ability to have the moral properties that trigger moral status. This is the case in other fields as well. For example, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences does not give out Academy Awards on the basis of an ability or capacity to perform but, rather, on achievement.

## VI.

I have many objectives in this dissertation. The most important of which is to weigh up the harms and benefits of existence with non-existence. I want to be in a position to argue that, for example, a person's existence is better or worse than her not existing at all. In order to accomplish this task, I will need to be able to do two things. One, I will need to be able to determine the value of a person's life. DS is the starting point for this objective. Secondly, I need to be able to compare the value of a person's life with the value of non-existence. Therefore, I need to set a value on non-existence.

The comparison that I am trying to make is a moral comparison. It is a comparison between the state of affairs in which a person exists and one where she does not exist. More precisely, I am interested in the comparison as one holding between a preferrer,  $x$ , and a state of affairs where  $x$  never became a preferrer (say, because  $x$  was born without a brain that could support conscious mental states or  $x$  was aborted early in her development). What value should the state of affairs where  $x$  never became a preferrer have? In other words, what value should non-existence have? Non-existence, it seems, should have zero or neutral value.

Some philosophers such as Holtug think that non-existence has zero value. The view that non-existence has zero value, one might think, has great intuitive appeal. Most people, it seems, would think that a life devoid of positive or negative moral properties is neither better nor worse than not existing at all. That is, most people would claim that a life with no positive and negative moral properties has zero value. Non-existence and a life with no positive and negative moral properties must be equal in value. If one state of

affairs has zero value, then the other must have zero value.<sup>21</sup> However, not everyone accepts this view. Some philosophers such as Heyd and Bykvist reject the view that non-existence has zero value. Heyd, for instance, argues that we cannot assign a value to non-existence, not even zero value.<sup>22</sup>

Many philosophers who work in population ethics assign zero value to non-existence. The vast majority do not bother to offer arguments in support of their views. In what follows, I will offer a brief discussion of this issue. I advocate the following view:

The Existence Comparison Assumption (ECA):

- (i) We can assign a value to non-existence.
- (ii) The value of non-existence is zero.
- (iii) Non-existence is qualitatively commensurable with the value of a person's existence.
- (iv) Therefore, a person's non-existence has neutral value for her.

If one accepts ECA, then, because non-existence has neutral value, one can claim that a person's existence can be better, worse or just as good as her non-existence. ECA is, thus, a guarantor that I can get my main project off the ground; namely, determining what the value of a person's life is compared to her non-existence.

If one views any doctrine that assigns a utility level to non-existence as being

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<sup>21</sup> Holtug seems to advocate a similar view. On page 381 of "On the Value of Coming Into Existence," Holtug states that "existence (or non-existence) has zero value for a person if and only if no positive and negative values befall her or the positive and negative values cancel each other out. Now suppose that a person exists but that no positive or negative values befall her. Since no positive or negative values befall her, her life has zero value. Likewise, no positive or negative values befall a person who does not exist. For the same reason, then, we may assign zero value to her non-existence. In both cases, zero value is assigned in the virtue of the absence of positive properties (having preference satisfactions, or positive mental states, etc.)..."

<sup>22</sup> See his Genetics: Moral Issues in the Creation of People, page 113.

possibilistic, then ECA must be an expression of possibilism.<sup>23</sup> Other doctrines are possibilistic as well.<sup>24</sup> I will not insist on possibilism, though. The conclusions that I will draw in this dissertation are just as compatible with actualism. I am not assuming the truth of possibilism over actualism. I am merely *expressing* my conclusions in a way that is compatible with possibilism and that the actualist will most likely reject.

It may be helpful to state clearly what “actualism” and “possibilism” mean in this context. Actualism, broadly speaking, is “the doctrine that everything is actual” (Parsons 138). According to actualism, when one talks about a possible person, one is really stating “that some possible world *represents* the actual world” as having a possible person in it (Parsons 139). As indicated, the above characterization is very general. More specifically, and for the purposes of the present discussion, actualism is the view that ethical theory should refrain from assigning a utility level to non-existence.<sup>25</sup> Possibilism, as indicated above, is the view that one can assign a utility level to non-existence.<sup>26</sup>

The problem for the actualist in this context is that “in the case of non-existence there is no person for whom things can have neutral value” (Bykvist 9). In other words, if one is an actualist and “having value for” expresses a relation, then one cannot say that a person’s non-existence is neutral for her (Bykvist 10). The problem is that, for the actualist, “If a person does not exist, then she is not standing in any relations. So nothing can be neutral for her” (Bykvist 10). In other words, the actualist will most likely reject provisions (i), (ii) and (iii) of ECA.

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<sup>23</sup> By “utility” I mean a numerical representation of an object’s wellbeing or welfare.

<sup>24</sup> See Fehige (1998), Kavka (1982) and Hare (1975).

<sup>25</sup> For a similar definition see Parson’s characterization of this view on page 137 of his “Axiological Actualism.”

<sup>26</sup> For a similar definition see page 525 of Fehige’s “A Pareto Principle for Possible People.”

There may be a way out of the above problem. There may be a way to be an actualist and also maintain the view that existence is neutral. The best way to confront the problem might be “to claim that non-existence *is* neutral for a person” while denying that it “*would* still be neutral for a person if she did not exist” (Bykvist 11). This move would not conflict with actualism and it would allow one to claim that a person’s non-existence is neutral for her since states of affairs can exist without obtaining in the actual world. Therefore, as an actualist, one could claim “that the non-obtaining state of affairs of someone’s non-existence stands in a certain relation to this person, *viz.* the relation of being neutral in value for her” (Bykvist 11). On this view, one could say that a person’s life is better or worse than her non-existence. The only limitation is that such an evaluation could only occur when the person actually exists.

If asked if there is an argument that could support this view, I would unfortunately answer in the negative. I simply do not think that the necessary metaphysics have been worked out yet. However, I think that a recent argument advanced by Wlodek Rabinowicz comes close.<sup>27</sup>

I will be assuming a possibilistic framework simply because I think that it is capable of generating far more interesting moral comparisons and it allows for a more fluid way of formulating my conclusions. Possibilism will allow me, for example, to say

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<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Rabinowicz has not published his thoughts on this issue. However, a rough account of his views can be found in Bykvist’s “The Benefits of Coming Into Existence.” Rabinowicz argues that, given an actual person, it is possible that another individual, say, “a guardian angel,” could prefer for the person’s sake that she had not come into existence if her life is bad for her. This suggests that a person’s existence can be better or worse for her than her non-existence. The guardian angel’s preference is based on his interest in bad things not happening to the individual he is concerned about. It should be stressed that Rabinowicz’s view does not show that non-existence is morally neutral. Strictly speaking, the only thing the account commits one to is the view that non-existence has preventive value. To claim that *x* has preventive value is simply to claim that *x* has value in virtue of what it prevents. This allows for Rabinowicz’s account to make sense, for example, of the wish that one had never been born. Yet, one might view Rabinowicz’s argument as a first step in the right direction in showing that non-existence has value.

that a person would have been better off not existing (because non-existence has zero value and her life has negative value), that non-existence would have been better or worse for a person (because the value of her life is less than zero), or that it is good that a non-existent person does not exist (because if she did, her life would be worth less than non-existence). I can also claim that a person is benefited or harmed by being brought into existence. An actualist will most likely only accept a claim similar to the last one. The first three claims are not compatible with actualism because, for the actualist, existence lacks any value, including neutral or zero value. Non-existent persons do not stand in any relations so their non-existence cannot be neutral or good or bad.

One should bear in mind that I am chiefly interested in a person's existence or non-existence insofar as the distinction is a moral one and not a *purely* metaphysical one. However, as I am interested in this distinction as a moral one, naturally, I am also concerned with the purely metaphysical distinction. On my view, only those individuals who are preferers, that is, conscious beings, exist in a morally relevant sense of the term. Those individuals who are not preferers are not persons and do not exist in a morally relevant sense. We should, therefore, assign zero welfare to these objects.<sup>28</sup>

I will eventually argue that some persons have lives that are worse than non-existence. One claim that I will make is that, in these cases, these individuals would be better off being non-preferers, such as anencephalic infants. An anencephalic infant is not a person because it does not and will not ever acquire preferences. Therefore, the anencephalic infant has a moral value of zero because it does not exist in a moral sense of

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<sup>28</sup> Compare this claim to Fehige's on page 524 of his (1998) where he claims that PAF dictates that "*everybody whose preferences are all satisfied* is assigned a maximum level of utility." Fehige takes this to include cases where "the individual exists and has preferences and they are all satisfied, or it exists but has no preferences (say, it's a stone, or a chair), or it does not exist."

the term. Surely such an infant exists, it is among the things one can touch and see. However, it does not exist in a moral sense and this is the sense that interests me in this dissertation.

The assumption that I am making is that every non-person or non-preferer is an individual who does not exist in a morally relevant sense. According to provision (ii) of ECA any such object has a moral value of zero. This does not mean that the value of a person's life could not be zero as well. If a person exists but her life has no positive or negative moral properties because, for example, they have cancelled each other out, then her existence has neutral value. In this case, her life is just as good as not existing because it is qualitatively equivalent to the value of non-existence.

## **VII.**

In this chapter, I have mostly set out and explained background information and key assumptions that I will need in the following chapter. The next chapter will contain the main argument for my view.



## Chapter Three

### I.

The last chapter contained the background material for my view. In this chapter I will advance my theory concerning the morality of bringing persons into existence. This chapter will provide a basic formulation of my theory. The next chapter will address objections against my view as well as refinements of it.

### II.

In section three of the last chapter, I adopted DS. Essentially, DS says that it is good when preferrers get what they want and bad when they do not get what they want. I now want to take this notion one step further. My view, *The Non-termination Thesis*, is composed of the following claims:

- i. Satisfied preferences are good.
- ii. Having extra satisfied preferences is good.
- iii. There is no limit to the amount of extra satisfied preferences it would be good to have.

I can quickly pass over (i) as this is a central component of DS. If you accept DS, then you will accept (i). In defence of this claim I will only argue that (i) has great intuitive appeal. If Sam wants  $x$ , then, as long as other things are equal, how could it fail to be good that Sam gets  $x$ ?

The second claim I have made is that having extra satisfied preferences is good.<sup>1</sup>

This view is slightly more controversial than (i). However, (ii) is also very compelling.

Consider an analogy. Say that a person thinks that money is good for its own sake. If

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<sup>1</sup> In this and later chapters, I will express the idea in (ii) by claiming that it is good for a preferrer to acquire new/extra satisfied preferences. I am aware of the ambiguity of this phrase. Clearly, we do not acquire satisfied preferences. We acquire preferences that are either frustrated or satisfied. Therefore, phrases such as “Person  $P$  acquires a new satisfied preference” should be considered shorthand for a description of the following state of affairs: “Person  $P$  desires  $x$  and  $P$ ’s desire for  $x$  is satisfied thus adding to the positive value of  $P$ ’s life.” The crucial point is that when a person develops a preference for  $x$  and then gets  $x$ , this adds positive ethical value to her life.

this is the case, then giving the person ten pounds is good. Now, why would it be the case that having ten more pounds is not also good? The answer seems to be that it could not fail to be *ceteris paribus* good also. The same should go for satisfied preferences. DS says that, given a preference, it is good for it to be satisfied. If this is the case, then is it not better for preferrers that they acquire new preferences as long as all of them will be satisfied? Consider the following logically possible worlds for a preferrer, George:

A: George has a preference for  $x$  at time  $t_1$  and he gets  $x$ .

B: George has a preference for  $x$  at time  $t_1$  and he gets  $x$ . At  $t_2$  he acquires a preference for  $y$  and he also gets  $y$ .

I would claim, and I think the vast majority of people would agree, that George's life in B is better for George than his life in A. George's well-being is higher in B than in A. As long as we attach positive value to satisfied preferences, then it seems that the natural thing to conclude is that it is always better for a preferrer to have more satisfied preferences than fewer satisfied preferences. I will conclude that it is always better for a preferrer to acquire new preferences as long as the preferences will all be satisfied. If what I have said above is correct, then there should be no concern with my adopting (ii).

I have accepted claims (i) and (ii); now I need to examine (iii). Claim (iii) says that there is no limit to the amount of good it would be good for a person to have. If (i) and (ii) are correct, then why think that there should be a limit to the amount of satisfied preferences it would be good to have? I do not see why there should be a limit. I think that it would be good for a preferrer to have an infinite succession of satisfied preferences. If one accepts claims (i) and (ii), then there seems to be little reason to reject (iii).

There is a rival view that one might hold. First, one might accept DS and yet

think that it is good to have extra satisfied preferences up to a point. Perhaps one might think that after one has obtained a certain amount of good, having more good would be neutral. There could be an upper limit to the amount of good it would be good to have.

I am not convinced by this reasoning. If one were to hold the view under consideration, one would certainly need an explanation of how having more good things could, after a certain point, not add to the positive value of a life. The other difficult task that would face the proponent of this view would be the problem of determination. At what point exactly would it cease to be good to have more good? This is a difficult question, one that needs to be answered if we are to take the view seriously. I have no idea how my opponent would provide a non-arbitrary answer.<sup>2</sup>

Claim (iii) seems to be the natural thing to conclude given my commitment to (i) and (ii). If we accept (i) and (ii), then it seems that it would be good for a person to go on acquiring new preferences and getting what she wants one satisfied preference after another. Consider George again. Say that there is a not so remote possible world for George where the following state of affairs obtains:

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<sup>2</sup> I will pursue this line of objection through the next chapter when I discuss what I call “the average view.” However, there may be another line of objection that coincides with the objection under consideration. In his essay, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” Williams deploys an argument for the thesis that it would be better not to be immortal. As Williams sees it, there are two relevant possibilities concerning the immortal life. One, our characters could evolve over time. Two, our characters could remain static. If the latter is the case, then either one’s experiences would be repetitive and one’s life would inevitably become boring, or one’s experiences would become varied and one would be essentially unaffected by one’s experiences. Perhaps one might argue, in the spirit of Williams, that having an infinite succession of extra satisfied preferences would cease to be good as a person would eventually become bored with the acquisition of new satisfied preferences.

I do not see how this is a major objection to my view. My view is about what is good for preferers, not about what would be boring. Just because acquiring a new satisfied preference would be boring for me, which would have to be shown, it does not follow that the new preference would not add to the positive value of my life. There is another point that merits consideration. The most important thing to note is that my view does not demand that one be immortal. Perhaps one could live a finite life and acquire an infinitely extensive set of satisfied preferences. One could have a mind that allowed one to acquire preferences infinitely fast. If these preferences could also be satisfied infinitely fast, then one’s life could be very short. So, nothing I have argued for commits me to the view that a person would necessarily need to be immortal.

C: George has a preference for  $x$  at time  $t_1$  and he gets  $x$ . At time  $t_2$  he acquires a preference for  $y$  and he also gets  $y$ . At  $t_3$  he acquires a preference for  $z$  and he also gets  $z$ , and so on *ad infinitum*.

If B is better for George than A, then surely, as long as we have rejected any alternatives to claim (iii), C is better than B. If the betterness relation is transitive, then C must also be better for George than A. This suggests that the best world for George is C, where he acquires an infinite succession of new satisfied preferences.

I think that claims (i), (ii) and (iii) are on safe ground. I will therefore introduce the nucleus of my view:

*The Non-Termination Thesis (NT):* It is *ceteris paribus* good for a person to acquire the value of a non-terminating succession of extra satisfied preferences.

NT says that it is good, given a preferrer, that the preferrer continuously acquire new satisfied preferences. It is important to note that there is nothing special about the preferences themselves. What matters is the positive ethical value preferrers get from satisfied preferences. Preferences as such are neither here nor there. The “packaging” of this good is not important.<sup>3</sup> NT says that there is no limit to how many satisfied preferences it would be good to have. Therefore, it must be good, or so NT says, to have an infinite amount of extra satisfied preferences.

I will briefly outline what I mean by the claim that it is good to have an *infinite* amount of satisfied preferences. I do not want to delve too deep into murky metaphysical waters, so I will keep my account as simple and brief as possible. NT says that it is *ceteris paribus* good that every preferrer have the value of an unending succession of satisfied preferences. This means that it is good to have a set of satisfied preferences

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<sup>3</sup> This coheres well with my comments in chapter one concerning DS. Recall that preferentism is not essential to my view. It is important to bear in mind that I have based my view on the *disjunction* of hedonism and preferentism.

whose members can each be put into direct bijection, that is, a one-to-one correspondence, with each of the natural numbers. In other words, it is good to have an omega sequence of satisfied preferences.<sup>4</sup> This omega sequence corresponds to only one among other orders of infinity, that is, aleph-null. This means that it is good that a preferrer will never acquire her last satisfied preference, no matter how many she has had before. It is good that every preferrer has the value of additional satisfied preferences in her life. That is, the domain of satisfied preferences that it would be good to have has a certain property; namely, it has the ordinal property of having no last member.<sup>5</sup>

There is a point that I will mention before proceeding with the rest of my argument. It might be possible to satisfy NT with a single satisfied preference of infinite value. If we can aggregate well-being, then there is no reason why the sum total of all the preferences in the infinite set would not equal the value of a single infinitely valuable satisfied preference. All NT commits us to is the view that it is good to have an infinite amount of positive value. NT need not commit us to the view that this good needs to be distributed across a specific number of preferences.

In what follows I will assume, largely for the sake of simplicity, that there is no single preference that has infinite value. I will assume that getting the amount of value that it would be good for a preferrer to have requires one to acquire an infinite succession of individual satisfied preferences.

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<sup>4</sup> I am using the terms “sequence” and “succession” mostly because I do not want to commit myself to the view that a person could be the subject of an infinite amount of preferences at once. The problem of there being insufficient cortical resources in place for a brain to support the existence of infinitely many preferences at once would certainly need to be addressed.

<sup>5</sup> I do not think that this domain has the cardinal property of being as large as mathematically possible. I have not committed myself to any notion of infinity that is trans-omega in nature. This is because I want to avoid any dubious or overly complex metaphysics. For an account that addresses these complexities and sets out what it means to want to be an immortal in a post-Cantor world, see Phillip Bricker, “On Living Forever.”

### III.

Thus far, I have claimed that it is bad to have frustrated preferences. I have also claimed that it is good for every preferer to have an omega sequence of satisfied preferences. This claim may seem *prima facie* strange. However, support for the view can be found, for example, in Singer. Singer states that all conscious sentient beings “have an interest in experiencing as much pleasure and as little pain as *possible*” (Singer 131, emphasis added). I do not think that Singer was simply careless in his choice of words. It really is good for each of us to have as much good as possible.

I will now develop these claims in greater detail. Enjoying an infinite succession of satisfied preferences is good. Not enjoying an infinite succession of satisfied preferences must be bad. This can be expressed in the following Sufficient Condition for Badness:

$\text{Badness}_{\text{suff}} = \text{if } x \text{ is good for a person, then } \sim x \text{ is bad for her.}$

This condition for badness is met by the transition from the goodness of enjoying an infinite amount of satisfied preferences to the badness of not enjoying them.

If what I have said above is correct, then a person’s life is bad to the degree a) that she has a net amount of frustrated preferences and b) she has not enjoyed an omega sequence of satisfied preferences. This is because a) is a by-product of DS and b) meets the sufficient condition for badness set out above. I will now argue that if either a) or b) holds for a person, then her interests have been violated. I will conclude by arguing that it is always a harm to have one’s interests violated.

I claim that it is in every rational preferer’s interests to have all her preferences satisfied and to acquire an omega sequence of extra satisfied preferences. What, one

might ask, are interests? Consider the following definition of interests:

Interests<sub>=def</sub>  $y$  is in the interests of  $x$  if and only if  $y$  increases the positive value of  $x$ 's life.

I think this is a definition that most people would accept.<sup>6</sup> My definition of interests says, in other words, that  $y$  is in a person's interests if and only if having  $y$  makes her better off. Things that are in our interests are good for us. This is what people, I suggest, mean when they say that something is in one's "best interests."

If we have interests in things as long as they increase the positive value of a person's life, then surely we have interests in our preferences being satisfied. Satisfied preferences are the bearers of positive value. So, one might say, getting what one wants is *ceteris paribus* in a person's interests. Always note the *ceteris paribus* clause in this context. As soon as we are considering an individual who wants something that is detrimental to her well-being, then the *cetera* are not *paria*.

I also claim that having an omega sequence of extra satisfied preferences is in our interests. It is in every preferrer's interests to acquire new satisfied preferences because this increases the positive value of a person's life.

Suppose that  $x$  is in Mary's interests. If Mary does not get  $x$ , I will say that Mary's interests (more specifically, her interest in  $x$ ) have been *violated*. Say that Mary has a preference for  $x$  and that some state of affairs,  $y$ , prevents her from getting  $x$ . We can say two things about this scenario. First, Mary is worse-off because she has suffered the harm of having her preference for  $x$  frustrated. Two, Mary's interest in getting  $x$  was violated as a result of her losing the positive value of  $x$ .

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<sup>6</sup> Some might think that some interests are of more importance than others. For example, one might hold that the interest in having existing preferences satisfied is more important than the interest in a new satisfied preference. However, in this dissertation I will be operating under the assumption that it is not the case that certain components of a person's well-being are more important than others.

NT says that it is good to have an omega sequence of satisfied preferences. An individual who misses out on an infinite amount of good is seriously deprived, which of course is a bad thing. The person is deprived in the sense that her well-being has not been promoted by the acquisition of an infinite set. Therefore, I claim that it is *ceteris paribus* bad to have one's interests violated in this way as well.

What would we say about a possible world in which Mary were actually to get  $x$  because in this world some state of affairs,  $z$ , leads her directly to the acquisition of  $x$ ? Acquiring  $x$  makes Mary better-off. So, in this case, I would say that  $z$  *promoted* Mary's interests. I claim that it is *ceteris paribus* good to have one's interests promoted.

In the preceding paragraphs, I claimed that it was bad to have one's interests violated. Now I want to claim that this badness is directly linked to the concept of harm. I claim that harm consists of the violation of a person's interests. The following is my definition of harm:

Harm<sub>=def</sub>  $P$  is harmed if and only if  $P$ 's interests are violated.

There are two ways one can have one's interests violated and thus two ways one can be harmed. First, if a person has an existing preference frustrated, she is harmed. Secondly, if a person is deprived of a new satisfied preference, she is also harmed. It is important to note that I have not claimed that there are two *types* of harm. Harm is a unitary concept on my view. All I have claimed is that there are two *ways* of being harmed. In following sections, I will suggest that whether a person is harmed or not is actually not the whole story. I will argue that only uncompensated harms pose serious threats to persons.

A relevant comparison can be made between the notion of harm that I have



advanced and the way in which Feinberg has analyzed harms.<sup>7</sup> Feinberg claims that one sense of harm has to do with “the thwarting, setting back, or defeating of an interest” (Feinberg 33). Feinberg argues that to have an interest in something is to “have a kind of *stake* in its well-being” (Feinberg 33). When a person has a stake in *X*, she stands to “gain or lose depending on the nature or condition of *X*” (Feinberg 34). Surely, then, on Feinberg’s account as well we have interests in having existing preferences satisfied. Persons stand to lose a great deal if their preferences are not satisfied. One might also say, on this view, that a person has an interest in acquiring new satisfied preferences as these new preferences are the bearers of positive value. In this sense, one could argue that persons clearly have an interest in the positive value of their lives increasing. Persons surely stand to lose a great deal if the positive value of their lives is not increased. More specifically, a person stands to miss out on having a better life.

In so far as we have an interest in the positive value of our lives increasing, it is important for us to acquire new satisfied preferences. In not acquiring a new satisfied preference, our interest in the positive value of our lives is “thwarted.” For Feinberg, an interest is thwarted when it is prevented from advancement or improvement (Feinberg 53). This is, on Feinberg’s view, sufficient for harming a person.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV.

I need to introduce a few more principles before proceeding to the main body of my argument. The principles may be expressed as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Feinberg is mostly interested in “harm” as it is used in a legal sense. Feinberg is mostly interested in the sense in which a person is harmed by another individual or group of individuals. However, setting these issues aside, the basic notion of harm that Feinberg is working with coheres well with my views.

<sup>8</sup> Again, it is important to bare in mind my comments in footnote four regarding the differences between Feinberg’s project and my own.

*Compensated Harm Principle* (CHP). It is always *ceteris paribus* bad for a person to be harmed. However, if a person is harmed, it is *ceteris paribus* always better for the harm to be compensated. Harms that are accompanied by a greater amount or equivalent increase in benefits are compensated.<sup>9</sup>

*Uncompensated Harm Principle* (UHP). It is always *ceteris paribus* bad for a person to be harmed. However, if a person is harmed, it is *ceteris paribus* always worse for the harm to be uncompensated. Harms that are not accompanied by a greater amount or equivalent increase in benefits are uncompensated.<sup>10</sup>

I will not offer independent arguments for CHP and UHP. However, there is a more general principle that underscores the thinking behind these two principles. In what follows, I will discuss it. The principle is this:

*The Harm Principle* (HP). It is *ceteris paribus* always better that a person is never harmed. However, if she is harmed, it is *ceteris paribus* better that the harm is compensated rather than uncompensated.

HP is far more theoretically basic than CHP and UHP. In other words, it would be strange if CHP and UHP were true, and yet HP was false. If one accepts CHP and UHP, one will accept HP. HP is simply a more general version of CHP and UHP. It should also be noted that I intend CHP, UHP, and HP only to concern person-relative value, and not value *simpliciter*.

The Harm Principle follows rather straightforwardly from intuitions about harms. We would rather not be harmed. It is better, one would think, to go through life without ever being seriously harmed. It is better to live a life full of benefits than it is to experience the horrors of Auschwitz. I think this is relatively uncontroversial. Most of us experience some harms in our lives, though. We can take the good with the bad, as

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<sup>9</sup> See Tim Mulgan's "What's Really Wrong with the Limited Quantity View?" It should be noted that Mulgan distinguishes between compensation to the individual from compensation to others. For a utilitarian, for instance, it does not matter whether the compensating benefit is enjoyed by the person who is harmed or by another person.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

long as the bad does not outweigh the good in life.<sup>11</sup>

We think, for example, that a certain amount of frustrated preferences in life are acceptable as long as their disvalue is in some way counter-balanced by the presence of other compensating benefits; this is what HP says. However, when the harms of one's life become so intense or so numerous such that they overtake the good aspects of a life, then one's situation becomes problematic.

In summary, HP is a very straightforward and attractive principle. It is a more basic version of two other attractive principles, UHP and CHP. HP is against harms to individuals. However, HP is also very realistic; it says that if harms occur, they had better be compensated if they are not going to damage one's overall lifetime well-being.

## V.

Every harm a person suffers has a disvalue for the person who suffers it. I do not think that it matters precisely what value we place on the harms. For example, one might think that for each benefit a person has we should assign it a value of +1 and for each harm a person has we should assign it a value of -1. Alternatively, one might take account of the strengths of possible and actual preferences. One might say that if a person wants  $x$  with a strength of 6 and she gets  $x$ , then the satisfied preference adds a value of +6 to her overall well-being. The same would apply to frustrated preferences only they would be given a negative value. One could tell a similar story about the case in which a person does not get the value of an extra satisfied preference. One could simply say that the disvalue of the harm is the value the extra satisfied preference would

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<sup>11</sup> HP and the notion of compensation often emerge in discussions concerning the problem of evil. For example, Swinburne argues that God does have the right to allow humans and non-humans to suffer "so long as the package of life is overall a good one for each of us. Bad aspects have to be compensated by good aspects" (Swinburne 235).

have had were the person to acquire it.

For my purposes, it does not matter how one ascribes values to harms and benefits. What matters is the following. First, we should ascribe a positive finite value to benefits and a negative finite value to harms. Second, and most important, the values of harms and benefits must be commensurable. These claims can be expressed in these principles:

*The Value Ascription Principle (VAP):* We must assign finite values to harms and benefits.

*The Commensurability Principle (CP):* Harms and benefits are commensurable.

I doubt that VAP will pose many problems for my account. The qualifier “finite” is an important component in VAP. Earlier I set aside the notion that there could be goods of infinite value. In keeping with this assumption, I have ensured that all value ascriptions must be finite in value. CP is relatively straightforward. It only states that commensurability holds between all harms and benefits. More precisely, given any harm  $h$  and any benefit  $b$ ,  $h$  cannot be more ethically significant than  $b$  as long as the disvalue of  $h \leq$  the value of  $b$ . More precisely still, given any harm  $h$  and any benefit  $b$ ,  $h$  can outweigh  $b$  if and only if  $h > b$  in value.

Taken together, CP and VAP have an important implication. They imply that lexical views are false. I have discussed some lexical views in chapter one and rejected them. For now I will make the provisional assumption that such views are false and I will adopt CP. Some will not find fault with this assumption. Broome and Rawls reject lexical views. Broome, for example, argues that “it is implausible that any value lexically dominates any other” (Broome 24). I will return to this issue in more detail in the following chapter. For now, I will adopt CP and VAP.

## VI.

My project is primarily to determine how good or bad a world or a person's life is. I will now argue that all actual human lives are so bad that it would have been better had all of us never come into existence. I will also argue that our world is worse than an empty world.

Above I claimed that each harm a person acquires has a finite disvalue for the person who is harmed. I also claimed that each benefit a person acquires has a finite value for the person. Take an individual who has a net amount of harm in her life. HP says that harms are bad. However, HP also says that it is only in a case where a person has a net amount of harm in her life that her situation becomes problematic. If a person has a net amount of harm in her life, then certainly her life is worse than not existing. Every person has a net amount of harm in her life. Therefore, every person's life is worse than not existing.

To see why this is the case, consider the case of an individual, John. John is a preferrer and so is a person. Furthermore, John has acquired a large, though finite number of preferences in his life *all* of which have been satisfied and carry with them, just as VAP says, a finite positive ethical value. John, like the rest of us, also has an interest in acquiring new satisfied preferences. However, John is ninety years old and will die in a few minutes, before he can acquire a new satisfied preference.

Now, whenever a person is deprived of a new satisfied preference, this violates her interests and is thus a harm with a finite disvalue. If John, like any other person, is deprived of an infinite number of new satisfied preferences, then he suffers an infinite number of harms. The last claim follows straightforwardly from VAP which I presented

in the last section. VAP states that every harm carries with it a finite disvalue as a harm. CP together with my compensation principles state that, because each harm has a finite disvalue, an infinite number of harms cannot be compensated by a finite amount of positive value. The disvalue of being deprived of an infinite amount of extra satisfied preferences outweighs the value of any finite amount of actual satisfied preferences. Therefore, there is always some uncompensated harm in everyone's life, no matter how good their life may seem.

John is badly off indeed. If we compare the value of John's life to the value of non-existence, then it seems that John's life is much worse than not existing. ECA says that non-existence has zero value. However, John's life has a net amount of negative value. Thus, his life is worse than not existing at all.

How good or bad is our world? Assume that the value of an empty world is neutral.<sup>12</sup> Now, assume that, as most people think, the existence of persons whose lives are better not lived than lived makes a world a worse place. Nobody has a life that has positive value in our world. Therefore, it follows that our world, being a non-empty world full of badly off individuals, is worse than an empty world.

This is not the only way of looking at the matter. Another way of presenting the view is this. I word of caution maybe in order before I proceed. For illustrative purposes and also for the sake of argument, I am temporarily setting ECA aside for the remainder of this section and assigning other values to non-existence besides "zero" or "neutral." Consider possible properties of a person, *P*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In this context, an empty world is a world with no preferrers and thus no preferences in it.

<sup>13</sup> I am setting ECA aside and pursuing the current style of argument because of the recent influence that Professor Benatar's work has had. The current way of presenting my views will allow for an easy comparison between his views and my own.

- A: *P* exists. *P* has a net amount of satisfied preferences. Value: Good.  
 B: *P* exists. *P* misses out on the value of an infinitely extensive succession of extra satisfied preferences. Value: Bad.  
 C: *P* exists. *P* does not miss out on the value of an infinitely extensive succession of extra satisfied preferences. Value: Good.  
 D: *P* exists. *P* has a net amount of frustrated preferences. Value: Bad.

The best world is one in which both A and C obtain for *P*. The worst world for *P* is one where both B and D obtain. So, *pace* Leibniz, we already know that our world is not the best of all possible worlds. This is because the best our world has to offer a person who exists is A and B. Now, consider possible properties of *P* where *P* does not exist.

- E: *P* does not exist. *P* does not suffer the harm of missing out on an infinitely extensive succession of extra satisfied preferences. Value: Good.  
 F: *P* does not exist. *P* does miss out on being a preferrer and thus having a net amount of satisfied preferences. Value: Bad.  
 G: *P* does not exist. *P* does miss out on being a preferrer and thus having a net amount of frustrated preferences. Value: Good.

The harm of B is only something that befalls preferrers. So, B cannot befall *P* if she does not exist. It is good that *P* avoids this harm, hence the value of E. It is also good that if *P* would have a life that was full of frustrated preferences, then *P* does not exist. I have claimed that F is bad. F is bad because if *P* did not exist, and would have had a good life, then *P* would have missed out on a great amount of positive value.

Those who follow David Benatar would disagree with this judgement. Benatar would label F as “not bad.” By labelling F “not bad” non-existence turns out to be better than existence. However, my argument is stronger than Benatar’s. The reason is that many who disagree with Benatar would argue that F should be labelled as I have labelled it. Such individuals would think that it is bad for the child who would lead a good life not to come into existence. This is the view, perhaps, of someone who thinks that we

have moral obligations to procreate because non-existence can deprive possible people of good lives. However, my argument leads to Unrestricted Pessimism even if I grant this premise to Benatar's opponent *and* I consider the best life for an actual person, a life that is full of satisfied preferences and completely devoid of frustrated preferences.

Suppose that we want to examine the pros and cons of *P*'s life in the actual world, where *P*, just like John, leads a life full of satisfied preferences. If so, we end up with the following states of affairs for *P*.

H: *P* exists: A obtains and B obtains. Values: Good and Bad.

I: *P* does not exist: E obtains and F obtains. Values: Good and Bad.

The values in H should not be controversial. The values in I are different though. The "Good" in I is something that most people would accept. Absent harms are good. The "Bad" of I is something that many would reject. Yet, as I said, I can grant this valuation to someone who thinks that it is bad to miss out on good things as a result of non-existence.

From the comparison of H and I it may seem as though I have a recipe for Restricted Pessimism. It looks like I have simply demonstrated that it is never better, though sometimes worse, for a person to live than not to live. This is because H and I look like they are equivalent in value. This suggests that a person who is well-off in our world has a life that is only as good as not existing at all. Of course, some lives would be worse than not living because they would not contain a net amount of satisfied preferences but, rather, a net amount of frustrated preferences. In this case, H would be labelled "bad" and "bad." So, it looks like there must be a neutral zone which has an infinite structure with a bottom limit but not an upper limit.



My view is not a version of Restricted Pessimism, however. The reason is that I is better for  $P$  than  $H$ . This is because the badness involved in missing out on an omega sequence of extra satisfied preferences outweighs the good involved in getting some finite number of preferences satisfied. Why is this the case? If a person is deprived of an infinite number of new satisfied preferences, then she suffers an infinite number of harms. Since each of these harms has a finite disvalue, a finite amount of positive value cannot compensate for an infinite amount of negative value. If one accepts CP, then this is the conclusion that must be drawn.

My view looks like Unrestricted Pessimism, minus the lexical domination that most versions of this view have. However, my view has some theoretical implications that make it a version of The Unified View. There are neutral lives according to my view. It is possible that someone could acquire an omega sequence of satisfied preferences and also an omega sequence of frustrated preferences that are equal in strength to all the satisfied ones. Since I have rejected lexical orderings of harms and benefits, these positive and negative values would cancel each other out. The remainder would be zero value. This life would be just as good as not existing. Therefore, I will conclude that there is a single neutral level with sharp upper and lower limits. There could also be lives with positive value. These lives would be ones with an omega sequence of satisfied preferences.

A “wolf in sheep’s clothing” picture of my theory has emerged. In closing I will say that, in reality, my view is just Unrestricted Pessimism. The fact of the matter is that all actual lives have negative value. This is because no actual creature relevantly similar to a human could ever acquire the necessary omega sequence of satisfied preferences in

order to live a neutral or a positive life.

Traditionally, preference-based ethics has focused on the satisfaction and frustration of preferences. However, my view presents a different way of looking at preference-based ethics.<sup>14</sup> The nucleus of my view consists of the following two claims:

- (i) Each person has an interest in acquiring a new satisfied preference.
- (ii) Whenever a person is deprived of a new satisfied preference this violates an interest and is thus a harm with a finite disvalue.

If one holds both (i) and (ii), then one is a *deprivationalist*. I take it to be an empirical fact that none of us ever acquires an infinitely extensive set of satisfied preferences. Any deprivationalist will have to claim that existence is worse for all actual persons than non-existence. Deprivationalism is not, therefore, overly keen on existence.

## VII.

In this chapter, I have offered the core of my view about bringing others into existence. In practice, deprivationalism says that it is always worse for a person to live than not to live. In the next chapter, I will discuss deprivationalism in greater detail and I will also consider possible objections to it.

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<sup>14</sup> Notice that advocating this view entails rejecting the very idea of extrinsic badness. Perhaps, therefore, one might object to my view on the basis that in order for my conclusion to follow, it has to be *intrinsically* bad not to have an infinite series of desire frustrations. I will discuss this issue in some depth in section nine of chapter four.

## Chapter Four

### I.

In the previous chapter I set out the basic elements of deprivationism. Essentially, deprivationism is against the creation of new preferers. I argued that in practice it is always worse for a person to live than not to live. In this chapter, I will expand on this view and address objections to it.

### II.

There is an important objection that I need to address. One component of my view is that when a person acquires her first preference, it would be better to go right on acquiring new satisfied preferences indefinitely. Therefore, there is no limit to the amount of extra satisfied preferences it would be good for a person to have.

If what I have stated about harms is correct, perhaps a similar argument can be deployed concerning benefits. True, having an extra satisfied preference is a benefit. However, if I want to be consistent within the framework I have presented in chapters two and three, then perhaps I must admit that there is a different way a person can be benefited. A person can be spared an extra frustrated preference. If this is correct, then one can easily construct a parallel argument which would show that persons are the subjects of an infinite amount of benefit. The argument runs as follows:

1. Each person has an interest in not acquiring a new frustrated preference.
2. Whenever a person is spared a new frustrated preference this promotes her interests and is thus a benefit.
3. Each of these absent frustrated preferences has a finite value as a benefit.
4. Since we are subjects of an infinite number of these benefits they are sufficient to outweigh any finite negative value or neutralize any infinite negative value.
5. Therefore, every preferer is the subject of an infinite amount of benefit which can neutralize the infinite harm of existence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is a different way of formulating this concern. Recall my principle that says “if  $x$  is good for a person, then  $\sim x$  is bad for her”. If one has reason to accept “if  $x$  is bad for a person, then  $\sim x$  is good for

This parallel argument shows that all mortal persons are the subjects of an infinite amount of benefit. Strictly speaking, the conclusion of this argument is not incompatible with deprivationism. However, the same form of argument that I used to support deprivationism, if valid, will prove also that persons are the subjects of an infinite amount of benefit. In what follows, I will examine i) ways in which my opponent might exploit this parallel counter-argument to her advantage and ii) ways of responding to the various challenges posed by this argument.

As I see it, there are two ways that my opponent might employ this argument to her advantage. First, my opponent might defend both the parallel argument and my argument in order to show that the harm deprivationism presents is cancelled out by an infinite benefit.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, my opponent could reject both the parallel argument and my argument. In this case, the parallel argument would not be taken at face value. My critic would not *advocate* the truth of the parallel argument, but rather, the point might be that if the parallel argument is bad and ultimately fails, then because it is relevantly analogous to my argument, deprivationism fails as well.

A problem emerges in both cases if I can show that the parallel argument is implausible. A person who advocates the parallel counter-argument in order to

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her,” and if it is bad to have an infinite series of desire-frustrations, it seems that I must admit that it is good for a person not to have an infinite series of desire frustrations. One might favour this parallel argument over the one I set out above. However, I will later show that the parallel counter-argument set out above is bad. My arguments will apply equally well to this alternative version. Also, later I will argue that there are good reasons to think that persons are, as a matter of fact, not the subjects of an infinite amount of benefit. So, no matter which parallel argument one chooses, the arguments used to reject one will apply equally well to the other.

<sup>2</sup> There is an interesting parallel with my discussion and Hick’s treatment of Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument in *An Interpretation of Religion*, pages 78-79. Here Hick shows that Plantinga’s argument for a maximally excellent being is also compatible with a maximally evil being. Hick notes that the two arguments produce two logically incompatible conclusions. Notice, though, that my argument for deprivationism and the parallel argument under consideration are not logically incompatible.

undermine deprivationism will have to confront the difficulty that there are good reasons to reject the parallel argument and not deprivationism. In what follows, I will argue that there are good reasons to reject the parallel argument that do not apply to deprivationism. This will also present a problem for the individual who wishes to undermine my view by showing that the parallel argument fails. If the parallel argument fails due to flaws that are not present in my argument for deprivationism, then my argument may not really be analogous to the parallel argument and there would be no reason to think that if the parallel argument fails, then so must deprivationism.

Consider a comparison between the conclusion of my argument for deprivationism and the conclusion generated by the above argument. My argument for deprivationism says that non-existence is always better than existence for a person with a finite life. If a person exists, then they will always be deprived of benefits. This is a bad thing. I have the intuition that existence is unfortunate for the following reason. All of us are brought into existence, without our consent, and over the course of our lives we are acquainted with a multitude of goods. Unfortunately, there is a limit to the amount of good each of us will have in our lives. Eventually each of us will die and we will be permanently cut off from the prospect of any further good. Existence, viewed in this way, seems to be a cruel joke. Deprivationism is intended to capture this intuition. Fundamental to deprivationism is the idea that a person who exists, no matter how good her life, is always deprived and that this is a serious harm. However, non-existent people are not moral patients and are not harmed. Therefore, non-existence is better than existence. For the strict consequentialist, deprivationism presents a strong moral reason not to create a person.

Consider the parallel argument independent of my argument for deprivationism. It says that each person is the subject of an infinite amount of benefit. For the strict consequentialist, this argument provides a reason to create a person. The conclusion implies that we should create as many finite lives as possible, however many frustrated preferences the lives might contain.<sup>3</sup> The argument implies that existence is preferable to non-existence because if a person lives, her life could always be worse. It is this fact that makes this argument so unappealing. If I am wrong, then it would not seem strange to cite as a reason for creating a person that the person's finite life will save her from further harm.

I concede that many might not find deprivationism attractive. However, the core intuition behind it, that life is good because of the goods it contains and that it is a significant harm when the goods of life expire, is common, I think. There is a very small step from this intuition to my conclusion. Deprivationism seems to be a believable view. Yet, I seriously doubt that anyone would accept the conclusion for the parallel argument. It is simply too implausible. We might have obligations to bring persons into existence, yet certainly not for the reason it cites.

There are two conclusions that follow from the above discussion. First, and most important, I think that I would be justified in setting the parallel counter-argument aside as its conclusion is unbelievable and extremely counter-intuitive. This means that it will be difficult to argue for the parallel argument in an attempt to show that the harm deprivationism presents could be cancelled out. Second, the objection cannot be sustained that if the parallel counter-argument fails, then so will deprivationism. The

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<sup>3</sup> Because of CP, any amount of negative value that a person would accumulate in her life due to frustrated preferences would be cancelled out by the infinite amount of benefit bestowed on her by ceasing to exist.

above clearly shows that, on closer inspection, the parallel counter-argument is not relevantly analogous to my argument for deprivationism. Simply because the parallel counter-argument cannot be sustained, does not justify one in rejecting deprivationism.

The parallel argument is implausible taken by itself. Yet, the above discussion may not convince everyone. I may need to say more about infinite benefits if I am to convince my opponent. Why not think that the absence of bad things in life constitutes a significant benefit for a person? If I want to remain consistent within the framework I have presented in the proceeding chapters, perhaps I must accept that absent harms are benefits. If we are subjects of an infinite number of absent harms, then perhaps we are the subjects of an infinite number of benefits as well. This claim does a great deal to undermine the core intuition of deprivationism and thus constitutes a significant problem for my view. Again, if we are subjects of both an infinite amount of benefit and an infinite amount of harm, then the harm that deprivationism presents could be neutralized. However, I think this rival view is false. The claim that we are subjects of infinitely many benefits can be expressed in the following principle:

*Absent Frustrated Preferences Principle (AFPP):* The absence of any frustrated preference that a person *p* could have had is *ceteris paribus* always a benefit for *p*.

I will argue against this principle. I will argue that there are good reasons to think that persons are not the subjects of an infinite amount of benefits. That is, I will argue for the following principle:

*Absent Frustrated Preferences Principle\* (AFPP\*):* Absent frustrated preferences benefit a person *p* if and only if *p* could have acquired the new frustrated preferences in the actual world in the normal course of events.

Contrast AFPP and AFPP\* with the following principles:

*Absent Satisfied Preferences Principle* (ASPP): The absence of any satisfied preference that a person *p* could have had is *ceteris paribus* always a harm for *p*.

and

*Absent Satisfied Preferences Principle\** (ASPP\*): Absent satisfied preferences harm a person *p* if and only if *p* could have acquired the new satisfied preferences in the actual world in the normal course of events.

ASPP is, of course, a central component of deprivationalism. Notice, also, that the two principles, AFPP\* and ASPP, are asymmetrical. In what follows, I will argue (a) that we should reject ASPP\* and AFPP (b) that the asymmetry of ASPP and AFPP\* conforms to some widely held intuitions that individuals have about absent harms and benefits and (c) that accepting this asymmetry can circumvent the problem under consideration. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the asymmetry of ASPP and AFPP\* as *The Asymmetry*. If you hold ASPP and AFPP\*, you accept *The Asymmetry*.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I will show that accepting *The Asymmetry* produces the intuitively correct results in relevant cases. *The Asymmetry* often emerges within the context of discussions about the badness of death.

To begin, compare the following two cases. Say that Mary dies at the age of forty from complications brought on by a degenerative disease that removed any possibility of future good in her life. However, it would have been possible, given the condition of her body, to remain alive for a considerable amount of time were it not for the fact that she did die. Yet, her life would have contained a great deal of bad in it, but no good. Now, consider another person, named Tom who has the same disease. When Tom dies at the same age the disease is in a far more advanced stage and his body cannot continue to

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<sup>4</sup> Note that there is another, different view called “*The Asymmetry*” in population ethics. Of course, the view I am discussing here is different.



function for any further period of time beyond the moment of his death.<sup>5</sup>

What can we say about these cases? First, most people's intuitions will tell them that both Tom and Mary suffer great misfortunes. Consider Tom, for instance. The intuition that Tom suffers a misfortune is common, I think. The misfortune that Tom has suffered is that his life could not have contained more good than it did. It is surely *ceteris paribus* bad when anyone arrives at the impossibility of attaining more good in her life. Everyone's life will eventually reach this point if they live long enough and it is not generally thought that this is a good or even a neutral stage in a person's life. Of course, sometimes we can tolerate the arrival of this stage to a greater degree as long as our lives have been better than most lives. Yet, this does not seem to counter-balance the sense in which it is bad not to be able to have more good in life. This is why we should reject ASPP\*. The fact that Tom has suffered a misfortune in dying clearly indicates the falsity of a principle like ASPP\*.

Second, we also think that Mary's misfortune is not as bad as Tom's because the disvalue of Mary's misfortune is reduced by the fact that her death excluded the real possibility of future evils from occurring in her life. We think that it is a good thing that Mary missed out on the future evils that would have occurred were it not for her demise.

However, these intuitions seem to be absent in Tom's case. There simply was no evil in store for Tom. Tom's death did not exclude bad things from his life because there was no bad in prospect for him. Any future bad or good in Tom's life was physically

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<sup>5</sup> There is an important distinction that needs to be made. This is not a discussion about the badness of death. This is a discussion about the quality of his life. Death permanently cuts off the prospect of acquiring a new satisfied preference for a person. However, an irreversible coma can do the same thing to a person. The mechanism by which a person is deprived of more good than they could have had is irrelevant. What matters for the purposes of my argument is we can say of any person that she could always have had more good in her life than she did and the fact that she did not is unfortunate.

impossible in the actual world. While the impossibility of future goods is a harm, the mere logical possibility of future harms in a person's life does not seem to bestow a corresponding benefit. If it did, it would not be strange to conclude that Tom is not the subject of a misfortune. Tom is the subject of a misfortune just as Mary is. Yet, Mary's misfortune does not seem as bad because her death prevented a great deal of suffering. This, it seems, is what most people would believe about these cases. This conclusion brings us to The Asymmetry.

Jeff McMahan has cited similar intuitions. In his book The Ethics of Killing, McMahan discusses the so-called Realism Condition. The condition states that in order for a person to suffer a loss, "a good must have been genuinely in prospect but then have been prevented by some intervening condition" (McMahan 133). However, McMahan notes that there are plainly cases where our intuitions tell us that a person has suffered a loss and yet this condition dictates otherwise. One example is the case of a young child who dies from progeria. Since the child "reached the far end of the process of aging, it was no more possible for him to continue living" than for someone who has reached the maximum human life span (McMahan 134). For my purposes, this case is relevantly similar to the case of Tom that I discussed above.

McMahan emphasizes that people have the strong intuition "that the Progeria Patient suffers a very grave misfortune" in dying (McMahan 134). This is true despite the fact that there was no more good that he could have had in his life. McMahan asks why the evil of not having anymore good in prospect is not "counterbalanced or cancelled out by the corresponding good fortune of being out of reach of further evil" (McMahan 134)? This raises a puzzle because "we would think that the general good fortune of

having no further suffering in prospect would more than cancel out the general misfortune of having no further good in prospect. But in fact we do not tend to think of the Progeria Patient in this way” (McMahan 134-35).

McMahan discusses the Progeria Patient within a different context. However, his intuitions on the matter closely coincide with mine concerning The Asymmetry. We both think that the Progeria Patient suffer serious misfortunes. Yet, notice, that we do not maintain that this individual’s misfortune is compensated by the corresponding benefit of being out of reach of further *possible* harm. Herein lies McMahan’s puzzle.

The Asymmetry provides a solution to McMahan’s puzzle. The Progeria Patient’s misfortune is neither neutralized nor compensated by being out of reach of logically possible harms. So AFPP does not obtain. However, we still maintain that the Progeria Patient’s misfortune is substantial. The Progeria Patient’s misfortune was to be completely cut off from the prospect of more good in his life. So, we should not accept ASPP\* but, rather, ASPP. The intuitions that underscore The Asymmetry coincide with McMahan’s and seem to be fairly widespread. If this is the case, then we should accept The Asymmetry.

This conclusion is an important one for my overall argument. Deprivationalism says that we are all the subjects of an infinite amount of harm that can never be compensated. However, I have argued against AFPP and have advocated AFPP\*. It is not the case that we are subjects of an infinite amount of benefit.

However, there might be an alternative account of the Progeria Patient where we compare the Progeria Patient’s life with a normal human life. One would then judge that the Progeria Patient suffers a misfortune insofar as his life is less good than a normal

human life—because it contains a lower level of net good. Consider, my opponent might argue, the fact that, when they are told that their child has progeria (rather than being a normal, healthy child) the child’s parents will be sad *for their child* because he will miss out on a normal human life. Can my view make sense of this reaction?

In response consider the following. First, there is a serious problem that confronts us when we try to make sense of the concept of a “normal” human life. In a later section of this chapter I will discuss and reject the so-called “average view” which seeks to make sense of the concept of an average human life in terms of well-being. I will conclude that any attempt to defend the view that there could be an average amount of positive value in a human person’s life is problematic. If it is difficult to make sense of an average amount of well-being, it will be equally difficult to make sense of the concept of a normal human life in terms of well-being.<sup>6</sup>

However, I believe that I can make sense of the parent’s reaction. I think the parent’s reaction comes to this. The Progeria Patient’s life is one that is extremely bad, just like everyone else’s life. However, the fact that makes the Progeria Patient’s life especially bad is that (i) he will not have the chance to acquire certain satisfied preferences that many people, including most parents, see as indispensable ingredients in a minimally decent life and (ii) he will have certain preferences frustrated that many people will have satisfied.

Consider (i) first. Parents are usually glad when their children acquire specific satisfied preferences such as the preference for a career, a family, and an education.<sup>7</sup> Many people, especially parents, view the acquisition and satisfaction of such preferences

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<sup>6</sup> I am here assuming that “normal” and “average” mean roughly the same thing.

<sup>7</sup> Fehige makes a similar point on page 512 of his “A Pareto Principle for Possible People.”

to be integral to a complete human life. The Progeria Patient will never acquire these preferences and thus will never enjoy their satisfaction. What most people do not realize is that the satisfaction of any and all preferences in our lives is outweighed by the infinite badness of existence. Of course, even if people were aware of this, they still might attach some importance to the satisfaction of certain preferences over others.<sup>8</sup> It is on this level that I can make sense of the parent's reaction. They are sad for their child because he will never acquire the satisfied preferences *they* would like him to acquire. This seems to be a sensible reaction even though the moral value of these fulfilled desires would not have made any difference to the overall value of the child's life were he to acquire them.

There is another sense in which the child's parents can feel sympathy for their child. The Progeria Patient will have existing preferences frustrated which most individuals do not. For example, the Progeria Patient will most likely have a preference for not acquiring a debilitating condition that results in grotesque deformities. This preference is frustrated and this is indeed tragic. This is tragic even though the Progeria Patient's life is just as bad overall as everyone else's life.

There is a way to illustrate my view. Consider two individuals, Roger and Mary. Say that both Roger and Mary have lives that are equally bad. Both of their lives have overall disvalues of -100. However, Mary acquired satisfied preferences for family, friends, and a career. Mary had many frustrated preferences, though. However, Mary's frustrated preferences were for relatively trivial things, but they were very numerous. Roger, on the other hand, never acquired satisfied preferences for family, religious fulfilment, etc. Roger's satisfied preferences favoured the bizarre and socially deviant. Roger did not have many frustrated preferences, though. However, the preferences that

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<sup>8</sup> I will say more about this in subsequent sections.

were frustrated were quite important, such as preferences for not having debilitating diseases.

Now, even though Mary and Roger have lives that are equally bad, one might be inclined to pity Roger more than Mary. This certainly seems coherent. It is in this way that I can easily make sense of the Progeria Patient's parent's reaction. The Progeria Patient has a life that is infinitely bad just like everyone else's life. However, we might be inclined to pity the Progeria Patient in a way that we do not pity others.

In conclusion, absent frustrated preferences are benefits. Yet there is a limit to the amount of this benefit in each person's life. Therefore, the infinite harm that deprivationism presents is not neutralized. In order to count as a benefit for a person, an absent frustrated preference needs to have been more than merely possible for her. The absent frustrated preference needs to have been a harm that a person could have received in the actual world under normal conditions. The same criterion does not apply in the case of absent satisfied preferences. This, I think, is what most people believe.

There is a related issue that is worth addressing before I proceed. If every person suffers an infinite amount of harms, then how can a deprivationist say that one life is worse than another if every life has the same infinite disvalue? There could be a way of claiming that certain lives are worse or better than others without appealing to the views I have set out above. It might be possible to say that the Progeria Patient's life, which is infinitely bad, is worse than the life of a healthy individual, which is also infinitely bad, in terms of total value. Peter Vallentyne and Shelly Kagan have defended principles that allow for additive value theories to assess the goodness of worlds involving the

aggregation of an infinite number of locations.<sup>9</sup> So, there is no difficulty in principle for a deprivationalist who wants to claim that *X*'s life is better than *Y*'s even though both persons suffer an infinite amount of harms. While this seems to be a *prima facie* odd claim to make, it seems to follow from peculiarities involving infinite numbers, rather than any defect in deprivationalism.

### III.

The next objection that I will address is that my view seems to be highly counter-intuitive. It seems odd, one might think, that everyone's life is worse lived than not lived.

In response I will argue for a few claims. First, just because my argument has counter-intuitive implications, which as it is I doubt, does not mean that what I have argued for is false. Counter-intuitiveness by itself, even if it could be established, does not guarantee falsity.

Secondly, as I said in the previous chapter, my view is really a version of The Unified View. There are lives that are worth living. However, it just so happens that none of us have such lives.

One might still think that it is counter-intuitive that even though there could be lives worth living, every actual life is below the bottom limit of neutrality. I have argued that our lives essentially go down hill when we acquire our first preference. Once we have had one preference, it is good to acquire another and another and so on. As a result of this, all of us are the subjects of an infinite amount of harm. Life seems to be a struggle that we cannot win. This is a serious harm. It is awful to be presented with the prospect of so many good things only to be denied them. The meagre finite number of goods that we have in life only offers us a fleeting glimpse of the amount of good that we

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<sup>9</sup> See their "Infinite Value and Finitely Additive Value Theory," *Journal of Philosophy*, 94 (1997), pp. 5-26.

should have. Life acquaints us with goods and then, before we can get enough of them, we are cut off from the prospect of having more. If there is no after-life, then there can be no compensation for the loss of so much good. With no hope for compensation, or any prospect of good beyond the fleeting glimpse we have in our relatively short lifespans, and no apparent meaning in life, what is so great about existence?<sup>10</sup> I do not have the intuition that any actual human life is worth living.<sup>11</sup>

There is another implication of deprivationism that will undoubtedly hurt some people's intuitions. The implication is this. A world where people all have lives with no pain, no suffering, no injustice and no frustrated preferences can be worse than an empty world. A world in which no person has an infinite number of preference satisfactions would necessarily be worse than nothing. This view will undoubtedly strike many individuals as highly counter-intuitive.

First, I do think that it is good to have a world without pain, suffering or frustrated preferences. However, the real point is that a world without these bad things is not automatically good *overall*. I have attempted to show that there are other things that are bad as well. Just because, for example, a person is never the subject of injustice during her life, does not mean that her life is good. She could have been the victim of many other harms. If these harms outweigh the good in her life, then surely her life is not a good one. A world without pain and suffering and yet where people live lives that are impoverished does not count as good. This is exactly what deprivationism says.

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<sup>10</sup> I have claimed that there is no *apparent* meaning in any life, however good it is. This seems to be true. The hiddenness of God and therefore the concealment of His preordained purpose for us as "children of God" is a big problem within this context. It is simply not clear what we are supposed to do with our lives or if they have any meaning or purpose. As I see it, this poses a problem for the optimist. For even if our lives are all really bad, we could still retain some hope of achieving a preordained goal or purpose in our lives if we could know that there is such a goal and what it is. This might not necessarily constitute compensation, but it would be a consolation.

<sup>11</sup> I seem to be in fairly good company on this score. See the work of Benatar and Fehige for example.



Secondly, many implications of deprivationism will be at variance with some people's intuitions. However, it will conform to the intuitions of some other individuals. I grant that the above implications will violate some people's intuitions. Yet, as Christoph Fehige has pointed out, no theory in population ethics has successfully conformed to everyone's intuitions. Indeed, this is "the only thing that several decades of research in this field can safely be said to have established" (Fehige 522).

The last thing to note about deprivationism is this. Nothing that has been said thus far excludes the possibility of there being worlds that are better than nothing. A world where a single inhabitant acquires the value of a non-terminating sequence of satisfied preferences is far better than nothing. So, my view is not as recklessly pessimistic as one might think.

If someone responds to my argument by claiming that it is counter-intuitive, all I will say is that I do not share her intuitions.<sup>12</sup> It seems that in response I can appeal to perfectly coherent and yet contrary intuitions on these matters. Therefore, if someone is going to pose a serious challenge to my argument, she will need to do more than merely appeal to cultivated intuitions.

#### IV.

I will now discuss an argument advanced by Ulla Wessels.<sup>13</sup> The argument in question is called "the suicide argument." The suicide argument is used to show that a view that implies that it is bad for a foetus to die ("Anti-Abortion") and also bad for a full-fledged person to die ("Anti-Death") is mistaken. There are two versions of the suicide argument. The first formulation runs as follows: "let us imagine the case of a

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<sup>12</sup> Nor do many other people as it turns out. See the work of Benatar, Fehige, Schopenhauer and Shiffrin to name a few.

<sup>13</sup> Ulla Wessels, "Procreation" in *Preferences*.

person *a* who does not attach any positive value to her own survival...She wants to commit suicide, even though she would be very happy if she didn't" (Wessels 432). In this case, Wessels thinks, "morality ought to respect the preference for death. Other things being equal, the suicide ought to take place and ought not to be prevented" (Wessels 433).

The second version of the argument is slightly different. Consider a person *b* "who is perhaps not against survival, but not for it either. She has no preference for surviving although she knows, and fully represents to herself, that she would become happy if she didn't die" (Wessels 433). The case of *b* is relevantly "identical to that of an early foetus that would become happy if it were not aborted. Both *b* and that foetus have *no preference for life*. If, as we said, there is no moral reason to keep *b* alive, then neither will there be one to keep the foetus alive" (Wessels 433).

The transition from *a* to *b* is significant. In the case of *a* there is a preference against survival which is supposed to show that death is better for *a* than survival and for *b* the absence of a preference for life generates the conclusion that "*b*'s death is *not worse* than her survival" (Wessels 433).

Both cases are strong enough to show that it is possible not to want to acquire a new preference. This might show that there is something wrong with my theory. Perhaps my opponent could borrow the conclusions that Wessels' argument generates to show that my claim that it is always good for a preferer to acquire a new satisfied preference is mistaken. If death and therefore the non-acquisition of a new satisfied preference can be better or not worse for a person, then perhaps there is a problem with deprivationism. In other words, if preferers can rationally reject or be indifferent to all

the value of new satisfied preferences, then this might show that it is not as good as I think it is for a person to acquire a new satisfied preference.

True, a person might be indifferent or might even reject altogether the added value that would come with acquiring an omega sequence of new satisfied preferences. I will deal with the latter case first. Just because a person  $p$  wants  $x$ , does not mean that getting  $x$  is in her interests. This is why the last chapter was replete with *ceteris paribus* clauses. It is good that persons get what they want. However, as long as the object of a person's desires is something that would violate her interests in any way, then it would be bad for her to get what she wants. This points up an important distinction. Acquiring  $x$  might be good-in-itself for a person and yet acquiring  $x$  might not be good for her all-things-considered. A person who commits suicide and rejects the value that would come with acquiring new satisfied preferences is getting what she wants and this is good-in-itself, but not good for her all-things-considered.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of person  $a$ , I claim that there need not be anything irrational about her desire for death. People might very well have rational preferences for things that would be bad for them. In some cases these people might even know that the objects of their desires would be bad for them. However, I will not insist on these claims. Even if it were conceptually impossible to have a rational preference that is bad for oneself, I am not interested in rationality. What interests me is what is good. My point is that as soon as  $a$  dies, she has had a preference satisfied that did not promote her interests. Therefore,

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<sup>14</sup> Consider another interesting example of this phenomenon. The desire of many old people after a normal course of a life to continue living and satisfy further preferences is rather weak. In short, what if an elderly or infirmed person would sincerely prefer not to acquire or satisfy further preferences. These cases are relevantly similar to the case of person  $a$  above. Again, a person who sincerely prefers not to acquire the value that would result from acquiring new satisfied preferences is getting what she wants and this is good-in-itself, but not good for her all-things-considered. I do not think that morality should respect such an individual's preference either.

it was not good that her preference was satisfied. I do not think that morality should respect *a*'s preference.

What about person *b*? I think that *b* poses fewer problems for my account. Person *b* is neither for nor against survival. Would it be bad if *b* were to die? Of course it would be bad. My project is in part attempting to show that what is good for a person is not entirely contingent upon the preferences she possesses at a given time. NT says that it is good to have an omega sequence of extra satisfied preferences. It does not say that a person must want the sequence in order for it to be good for the person to have it. Therefore, just as in the case of person *a*, it is good to keep *b* alive because it is in *b*'s interests.<sup>15</sup>

Above I have discussed the suicide argument. I do not see that it poses a problem for my theory. Therefore, I will reject it as a possible counter-argument against my view.

## V.

There is another objection that I will address. The objection in question is one advanced by Jeff McMahan. McMahan claims that it is irrational to avoid the evil of not having more good by ensuring that one has even less good. He states that "it is irrational to seek to prevent a potential person from suffering the loss of *continued* life by preventing him from having any life at all. The failure to get *more* good in life cannot negate the value of having *some*" (McMahan 370).

Perhaps one would see my argument as committing a similar error. One might think that McMahan's argument shows that my conclusion is false. After all, I have essentially argued that it would be best not to bring a preferer into existence due to the

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that, given my PAP, person *b* is not actually the same as an early foetus as *b* is a person and an early foetus most definitely is not.

fact that no actual preferrer ever acquires an omega sequence of satisfied preferences. I argued that it would be good to avoid existence on the grounds that existence entails a loss of goods for a person. This results in ensuring that future generations will not suffer the evil of not having infinite goods by creating a situation in which future generations will have no good. Thus, in preventing the existence of a future person for the reasons I have provided, one is simply acting irrationally.

I do not think that McMahan's argument counts heavily against my view. To begin, I am not interested in rational decision theory. As I claimed above, my project is about determining what is good for a person. I am not trying to find out what constitutes rational behaviour in the field of intergenerational justice. There might very well be links between rational decision theory and goodness. However, why think that there must be? It is quite possible that what is good and what makes sense do not always coincide. Since I am solely interested in the former, an objection based upon the latter does not directly concern me especially in the absence of evidence linking the two.

Suppose that there are such links or that McMahan's argument could be formulated in terms of goodness in order to pose a direct counter-argument against deprivationism. The conclusion might then be that it is bad not to bring a possible preferrer into existence because possible preferrers are made worse off by not existing if their lives would have a net balance of actual satisfied preferences over frustrated ones. This is because in not causing them to exist we are acting in such a way that they end up having no good rather than some good.

The above argument, formulated axiologically, is not a major threat to deprivationism. First, I have pursued a person-affecting approach to ethics in this

dissertation. Recall that PAP says that if a person, that is, a preferrer, is not affected for better or worse by an action, then the action is neither good nor bad. Possible people are non-existent entities and are not persons, so barring any effects on persons, we can do as we like. This is what the person-affecting approach that I have adopted says.<sup>16</sup> Yet, I could also pursue a different response. Deprivationalism is a doctrine that is just as compatible with actualism as it is with possibilism. In chapter two I adopted possibilism. However, as I stated, I could just as easily have adopted actualism. In this dissertation I have merely expressed deprivationalism in the language of possibilism. In order to circumvent the above argument I could adopt actualism. If actualism is assumed, then merely possible persons, being non-existent, will not be standing in any relations. Thus, nothing will be neither better or worse, nor good or bad, or even neutral for them. The objection would then never get off the ground. This would be another way of escaping the above counter-argument.<sup>17</sup>

Suppose we put axiological interpretations aside and concentrate on McMahan's argument as he presents it. In this case, I think that McMahan's argument misses the point. The real question, it seems to me, is not whether one is just avoiding the loss of

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<sup>16</sup> Existence is not a precondition for having value, but it is a precondition for something's being good or bad for someone. Recall that I have chosen to pursue a possibilistic approach in this dissertation. Like many possibilistic doctrines, I have assigned zero or neutral value to non-existence. Therefore, possible preferers have zero or neutral value. Possible preferers do have value, then. Possible preferers have neutral or zero value. This means that nothing can be either good or bad or better or worse for possible persons. This is what it means to have zero or neutral value.

<sup>17</sup> It might be worth commenting on the distinction I have made in this paragraph. There is a difference between modal actualism and person-affecting principles. One could easily accept one without the other. Roughly speaking, modal actualism is the doctrine that everything is actual. More precisely, it says that there are no non-actual things. Person-affecting principles only tell us that the moral status of an action is determined by whether it is better or worse for a person or persons. This is different from saying, as modal actualism does, that there are only actual persons.

further good by making sure that one has no good, but rather, whether the harm of missing out on more good is greater than the benefit of having some good. In deciding whether to bring a prefeerer into existence, the real question is whether the harms of her life will outweigh the goods. What I have attempted to show is that some prices are too high to pay. In the end, therefore, there is no reason to think that my strategy is irrational. Part of being rational means that one can weigh the value of harm against the value of benefit in a cost-benefit analysis. If the harms are too great, then it is not worth the benefit. This kind of judgement seems to be at the core of rationality. Therefore, even if I were not solely interested in goodness, I still do not think that the strategy that McMahan criticizes should be viewed as strictly irrational.

## VI.

In chapter one, I addressed arguments for Unrestricted Pessimism. Both arguments, I suggested, fall prey to a certain objection which I called *the absent consciousness argument*. I can apply this argument to my theory. There is a gap between cases where (a) a person exists and does not acquire an omega sequence of satisfied preferences (as in every real-life case), cases where (b) a person does not exist, and finally where (c) someone exists but does not have any preferences. Perhaps my view would dictate that (b) and (c) are equally good and that (a) is the least desirable of the three cases. If my view does, then it is seriously problematic.

Consider the following cases:

*The Normal Infant.* A healthy infant is born who will lead a life that, like most human lives, is replete with preference frustration and satisfaction.

*The Anencephalic Infant.* An infant is born with anencephaly and therefore

missing much of its brain. It has no conscious experience and therefore no preferences. It will lead a completely blank life for thirty weeks after which it will die.

According to my view, it would seem that the anencephalic infant is far better-off than the normal infant. The anencephalic infant will have no preferences at all. Meanwhile, the normal infant will never acquire an omega sequence of satisfied preferences. Therefore, between the choice of bringing into existence either child, it would be better, according to my view, to bring the anencephalic infant into existence. This conclusion seems to be at variance with intuition. Most people would think that a non-conscious, blank life is worse than a life with some good and bad aspects. However, there is no room for these intuitions within my account.

In my original discussion I suggested that a possible reply might consist of claiming that the anencephalic infant is not an individual who exists in the morally relevant sense of the term. However, I then claimed that it would be possible to rerun the argument in a slightly weaker form. I argued that instead of the anencephalic infant, we might consider a severely cognitively disabled person who has no preferences. If one were to do this, then one could claim that a) such an individual surely exists and b) the individual is better-off because it has no preferences. This move would preserve the counter-intuitiveness allegation.

In response I will claim that my argument escapes the absent consciousness argument because of the very strong way I have formulated PAP. Persons are those creatures who have at least one preference in their mental history. If a being is not a person, then it is not a moral patient and does not exist in a moral sense of the term. It would be impossible to reformulate the absent consciousness argument so as to get



around PAP. If a creature has never had a preference, it does not exist. One cannot “bring the anencephalic infant into existence” in any morally relevant sense of the term ‘existence’. Therefore, the absent consciousness argument poses no problems for my account due to the very strong way in which I have formulated PAP.<sup>18 19</sup>

## VII.

My argument suggests that everyone’s life in the actual world is below the bottom limit of neutrality. We are all harmed by being brought into existence. One might argue that my conclusion is paradoxical. My view implies, for instance, that it would be better to die rather than continue to live for some further amount of time because we have no hope of acquiring an omega sequence of satisfied preferences. This seems strangely

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<sup>18</sup> One should note that it is still true, according to deprivationism, that for any person, one can say that her life is worse than that of an anencephalic infant. Notice, however, that this does not mean that the absent consciousness argument has any weight. That argument works only in cases where we can talk of bringing anencephalic infants into existence. On my view, one cannot bring such a being into existence. The “lives” of anencephalic infants are *morally equivalent* to non-existence. Yet, it is possible that a proponent of the absent consciousness argument will find it bizarre that the parents of a normal, healthy infant should regret that their child was born with a brain. In response, I will say that in order to remain a consistent deprivationist I must claim that parents in this situation should regret that their child is not an anencephalic infant. However, for my account, this is only equivalent to claiming that the parents should have the less troubling sentiment that they should have used a functioning contraceptive device. However, I also think that the argument against my view is somewhat unfair. My opponent is forcing me to claim that the parents of a healthy child should regret that their child was not born with severe neurological and physical deformities. The response that this comparison elicits is a visceral one. The comparison that I am making is between existence and non-existence. For me, this is a moral comparison. All parents, in my view, should regret that they ever brought their children into existence. Also, everyone should regret the fact that they were ever conceived in the first place. This comparison sounds relatively innocuous because it is between a neutral state (non-existence) and a bad state (existence). However, when the comparison is framed in terms of severe cognitive and physical disabilities and a normal life, it distorts the relevant comparison. This is why I think the comparison is ultimately unfair and misleading.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, my opponent might argue, this reply comes to nothing more than a semantic quibble. It might be possible to express the objection in another way. One might argue that *giving birth* to the anencephalic infant does not, intuitively, seem better than *giving birth* to the normal child. However, my view apparently entails that it is. In response I will say that it is not at all obvious that the force of the absent consciousness argument survives this terminological revision. The revision strips the argument of all its morally relevant terminology. The primary question I am seeking to answer in this dissertation is a moral one. I am seeking to answer the question of whether or not it is good to bring a person into existence. I am not interested in the biological processes of gestation or birth *independent* of their impact on the goodness of a person’s existence/life. My opponent would need to provide an explanation as to how the biological process of giving birth would have any moral significance if it did not result in a person (i.e., it did not result in the creation of positive or negative value).

paradoxical indeed.

One way to respond to the objection is this. All lives in the actual world are such that none of them are above the lower limit of neutrality. This suggests that it would have been better for all of us never to have come into existence. However, it might not be better for all of us to die rather than continue to live. The reason is that nothing in my discussion precludes the possibility of actually acquiring the necessary omega sequence of satisfied preferences in a finite lifetime. The prospect of acquiring an omega sequence of satisfied preference is not *impossible* for mortals. Therefore, the mere expectation of this good, even though it is mostly irrational for all humans, might justify our continuing to live.

I would concede that the above seems like a rather desperate move. Another response is to argue that there is a difference between a life worth starting and a life worth continuing. I could spend a great deal of time setting out and explaining this distinction. However, I will not do so. I will merely sketch a rough account in hopes that this will alleviate some of the pressure that this objection places on my theory.

Just because a person does not have a life worth living, it still might be good for her to continue to live. There are different ways of addressing this issue. The most promising, given my framework, is this. Consider the following scenario. Say that Mary has a life that is well below zero. *Any* amount of good that she will have in her life will never compensate the amount of bad in her life. Clearly, Mary was harmed by being brought into existence and her life is thus not worth living. However, suppose that the conditions of Mary's life are tolerable and that Mary will go through a period in her life, just before she dies, that will be filled with good. Suppose also that Mary very much

wants to remain alive, even though her death is inevitable.

Even though the amount of good she will have in the period before she dies is relatively insignificant and thus insufficient to outweigh the amount of bad in her life, it seems that it would still be better for Mary to have these goods rather than not. Most people would think that it would be bad for us to kill Mary or for her to commit suicide just before having this good. This seems true despite the fact that this good cannot make Mary's life worth living as a whole. In case one is in doubt, consider the following twist in the scenario. Say that, as I stipulated above, Mary's life is very bad, but she does not know that it is.<sup>20</sup> If all the other conditions discussed above still obtain, then it might seem even more obvious that Mary should continue living and get the small amount of good that awaits her. This seems to be the case even though, as I stipulated, the value of these goods will be swallowed up by the total amount of badness in her life.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, if Mary's life were intolerable, then it might not make sense for her to stay alive to get a relatively small amount of extra good in her life. Many of our lives are not intolerable, though. This is true despite the fact that all of our lives are worse than not existing. Yet, just as in Mary's case, the total amount of badness in our lives should not diminish the value of getting some good in our lives even though this good will not change the total value of our lives. It seems that as long as our lives are tolerable and there is some good in view for us, morality should respect continued existence in the case

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<sup>20</sup> This claim might seem strange. One might think that a claim like this would seem counter-intuitive in a preference-based system. For those who are uneasy with this claim, recall that I have based my view on the disjunction of preferentism and hedonism. This claim should not seem odd for the hedonist in light of Benatar's recent work in this area.

<sup>21</sup> It might make sense to prefer one life over another even though both lives are of the same negative value if a) one life has goods that are distributed in a more aimable way and b) one life contains different types of goods than the other. See chapter three of Benatar's *Better Never To Have Been* for a discussion of similar issues. Also see the final paragraph in the first section of this chapter where I discuss the views of Kagan and Vallentyne. There does not seem to be any difficulty in arguing that one life is better/worse than another even if both contain equal (infinite) amounts of good/bad.

of a person who does not have a life worth living. Needless to say, this is only a rough answer to the objection. However, this seems to be the best way of answering it.<sup>22</sup>

### VIII.

In response, someone might argue that all I have succeeded in accomplishing is offering an analysis of quality of life that is far too strong. I have put standards in place that are too high. Perhaps one would want to place an upper limit on the total disvalue of harms that affect our well-being.

In order for this objection to have any force my opponent would have to offer some non-arbitrary suggestion about how to place an upper limit on the disvalue of the harms that persons suffer. I will explore one possible answer. One might suggest that deprivation only constitutes a harm if it leaves one with less than the average number of goods that the average person has in her lifetime.

What can we say about the strength of this response? I think that it is very weak.<sup>23</sup> First, appealing to the notion of an average does seem arbitrary. The proponent of such a view would need to address this problem. Second, notice that the argument appeals to the notion of personhood. The domain of persons is quite wide on my view. The problem is that there are many types of individuals who are persons. A normal dog is a person on my view because all normal dogs have preferences. However, the average

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<sup>22</sup> Compare the claims made in this section to the one's concerning my discussion of the Progeria Patient and Roger and Mary in section one of this chapter. It seems that we can coherently claim that between two lives of equal utility, one can be more desirable than the other. All lives are equally bad. However, because some lives contain different sorts of goods than others, these lives may be more desirable or seem more satisfactory than others. A bedridden quadriplegic and a person with total preference satisfaction have lives that are both infinitely bad in terms of total utility. However, it would still make sense on my view to prefer to live the latter life rather than the former. It is certainly possible for some lives to seem more satisfactory than others in certain respects even though they are of equal ethical value. Again, see section one above for my views on this matter.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that, in a sense, this objection cannot get off the ground on my view because every life has the same (infinitely negative) value. However, I will set this issue aside and give the objection its due.

amount of good in a dog's life is far different in quality and quantity than it is for a human person. This would undoubtedly tend to bring the average down.

Perhaps we could distinguish between types of persons in order to get the objection off the ground. I have my doubts about this move for obvious reasons. Where would we draw the lines between types of persons? Should lines be drawn across species? If so, how could a biological distinction such as species have moral weight in this context?

For the sake of argument, I will place the issue of how non-human persons would be affected by this argument aside. Therefore, the objection under consideration will be that a deprivation is a harm if it leaves a human person with less than the average amount of goods that a human person acquires in her lifetime. I will call this objection *the average view*.

Unfortunately, I doubt that this suggestion can be made sense of either. First, there is the problem of determining how to calculate the average amount of good a human person acquires in her lifetime. One can easily calculate the average number of years a normal human person lives. However, preferences are not like this. Preferences have different strengths, for example. Also, a person need not experience the satisfaction of a preference in order for it to contribute to the positive value of her life. These issues surely present problems for the advocate of the view under consideration.

However, just because the average amount of good a human person acquires in her life is not easily determined does not mean that there is not an average. In order for us to make sense of the objection, we do not need to know what the average amount of good in a life is. The fact that there is an average might be enough to motivate the

objection.

I will grant the above point to my opponent. However, it is important to notice just how difficult it is to make sense of this objection. The average view already suffers from the flaws that it does not say what is important about the average amount of good for a person, it forces us to make arbitrary distinctions within the domain of persons and that to a certain degree it relies on the measurement of something that may not be easily quantifiable. Yet, against my better judgement, I will set these concerns aside.

Say that we could know what the average amount of good in a life is. For the sake of argument say that the average amount of good that a human person living now has is about 76 units of good. Say that this is a global statistic. There are problems with the average view, then.

Imagine that there is a life-sustaining planet, Planet X, somewhere in Alpha Centauri. Imagine further that this planet is inhabited by other *Homo sapiens* with a genetic mutation that somehow reduces the amount of good that these individuals can have in their lives. Of course, the vast majority of the people on this planet might have very good lives. These individuals have less good in their lives, but not more bad than the average human on our planet. The average amount of human good on Planet X is 45 units.<sup>24</sup> If an individual from Planet X acquires 49 units, then one might be inclined to say that this individual is quite well-off. However, on Earth, such an individual would not be considered well-off. One might reasonably object that this counter-example shows that the average for a species cannot be the relevant comparison class because it does not

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<sup>24</sup> Planet X might be a great place to live. However, it might be the case, for example, that Planet X's inhabitants live very short lives and that this explains why their gains are so few.

make sense to claim that the individual from Planet X is badly off.<sup>25</sup>

There are a variety of ways the proponent of the average view could respond to this challenge. Most likely such an individual would want to claim that the individual from Planet X is indeed badly off for a human. If it makes sense to claim that the individual from Planet X is well-off, why not say that an individual from Zambia where the average amount of good in life is, say, 38 units is well-off if she acquires 49 units?<sup>26</sup> To claim that the individual from Planet X is not badly off is a mistake.

We do think that that the person from Zambia is badly off. This is precisely why it makes sense to eliminate the conditions that work against well-being in countries like Zambia. However, if the Zambian is badly off, then so is the person from Planet X. If Planet X were a remote island in the South Pacific, then it seems that we would most certainly consider their limited amount of good to be a significant misfortune. It does not seem to be the case that Planet X's extreme distance from us has any bearing on the issue.

In order to illustrate this point consider the following scenario. Due to advancements in technology we are capable of travelling to Planet X at no great expense to ourselves. Furthermore, we have also developed advanced gene therapies such that we have the ability to correct the genetic mutation from which the individuals on Planet X suffer. Correcting this genetic mutation would result in a population with an average amount of well-being identical to our own. It seems clear that if one refrained from providing the population of Planet X with this therapy, then one would be doing

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<sup>25</sup> The reason why one might have such an intuition is that one would want to say that the individual with 49 units of good from Planet X is a) quite normal and healthy for a person on that planet and b) quite fortunate for a person on that planet.

<sup>26</sup> People from Zambia have restricted well-being mostly because of high HIV/AIDS rates and other poor living conditions. Therefore, things might not be equal with respect to the two cases. Not only are the gains of Zambians quite few, the amount of bad in their lives is also (probably) quite high. However, for the sake of argument, I want merely to focus on average gains.

something just as reprehensible as if one had the means of increasing the average good of Zambians and did not. If it makes sense to say that the Zambians are badly off, then it must also be that the individuals on Planet X are. This is the best way of responding to the Planet X counter-argument.

Perhaps these responses can be sustained. Still, one might raise a further objection to the average view. A corollary of the view, it might be objected, is that the population of Planet X was not badly off before they knew that people on Earth live longer. How can such new information decrease their level of well-being? Well-being seems to be something that is not relative in the sense that this view seems to suggest.

The best way of responding to this challenge is to claim that the population of Planet X did not become worse off as a result of the new information they acquired upon coming into contact with people from Earth. The fact of the matter is that they always had a low level of well-being, they just did not know it. The bare awareness of the facts about their existence did not change their well-being, it just made them realize the truth about their unfortunate condition.

If we accept the above as a realistic response, then, one might argue, the proponent of the average view has tacitly committed herself to the following view which may seem less appealing. That is, if well-being is measured in part by how an individual's life compares with the range of lives possible for its species, that is, what is the species norm, then it is probably the case that most people in the world today are badly off indeed. The quality of life available to the average person living six hundred years from now will most likely be incomparably better than a well-off person living right now. This is true just as it is true that the quality of life of the average person living



today is incomparably better than the life of a well-off human who lived six hundred years ago. This, it may be objected, is too counter-intuitive to be correct.

This consequence of the average view may be counter-intuitive. However, the view under consideration only implies that individuals whose lives might have been in Hobbes phrase “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” would be considered badly off. Many might accept this view. We often count ourselves lucky that we were born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with all its pleasures, conveniences and niceties and not in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> However, the view seems to be silent about whether we are badly off with respect to the conditions of future generations. This is because if we are to make a comparative judgement we have to know against what we are comparing our current state of well-being. It is possible to make retrospective comparisons, however it is senseless to attempt to compare our current state with an unknown future one. Medical science and the welfare of the average person will most likely advance over the years. However, until we are directly confronted with such advancements or know the precise nature of such advancements, it does not make sense to think of our lives as being unfortunate.

The above claims might be true. Perhaps retrospective judgements about well-being are the only ones that are reliable. Yet, there are two problems with the above response. First, future generations will probably have higher levels of well-being and therefore the average number of goods for a person will be increased. Eventually, as more people are added to the population and as well-being improves, which it probably will, the quality of our lives will sink below the median level on the scale that measures well-being. This is true even of very good lives. We do not need to know the precise nature of the comparative judgment we are making. All we need to know is that our lives

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<sup>27</sup> This view, though common, might not be altogether coherent. See, for example, Nagel, “Death” page 79.

will be badly off in comparison to future ones. Second, many would not have the intuition that people who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century were badly off as long as they were *relatively* well-off. It might make more sense to embrace relativity with respect to well-being. This seems to be a recurring theme of the objections that have been raised thus far. I will discuss it in greater depth later.

There is another counter-example that is closely related to the Planet X counter-example discussed earlier. It is a variant on an argument advanced by Jeff McMahan.<sup>28</sup> Imagine that geneticists have discovered a way to modify a normal human such that she will live a longer, happier, and healthier life than the average human. Suppose further that the genetic therapy in question affects an individual's germ cells and is therefore inherited. Any offspring that a recipient of this therapy will have will be genetically enhanced and will therefore have a significantly increased capacity for well-being. Eventually these individuals will become numerous enough such that one will not be able to regard their enhanced capacities as purely anomalous by-products of genetic engineering. As the numbers of these genetically enhanced humans increase, the median for the range of well-being available to normal humans will have shifted to a higher level on the scale that measures well-being. The original, genetically unmodified humans will have become deficient. Their lives will become undesirable, much like the lives of individuals with Down's syndrome seem to cognitively normal individuals.

According to any view that accounts for well-being in terms of a comparison between members of a species, such as the average view, the lives of hitherto normal humans will become badly off. McMahan thinks that the above result is intolerable. This is because "it seems unreasonable to suppose that they have become unfortunate just

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<sup>28</sup> McMahan's original example was The Superchimp on page 147 of his *The Ethics of Killing*.

because an expanded range of well-being has become possible for a majority of the members of their species” (McMahan 148).

There are three avenues open at this point. One would be to view the above counter-arguments as decisive and to reject the notion that well-being should be assessed in terms of a comparison with members of a certain species. Secondly, one could acknowledge that these counter-arguments decisively count against the average view and supplement this view with another comparative dimension of well-being. Lastly, one might accept, for example, the implication that the original, genetically unmodified people are unfortunate and not surrender the average view.

We seem to be at an impasse. Many might have the intuition that the unmodified humans would be badly off. However, most people, I think, would side with McMahan on this issue. In this section I have explored the view that there could be an average amount of positive value in a human person’s life. A recurring theme in my discussion seems to be that the average view commits one to the view that non-relative judgements about the well-being of a species cannot be made. One cannot say a reasonably well-off individual who lived six hundred years ago was well-off, or that the individual from Planet X is well-off, lastly one cannot say that a genetically unmodified human is well-off. All of these individuals will inevitably have far less than the average number of human goods in their lives. Acceptance of the average view seems to demand that we reject relativity with respect to well-being. Well-being cannot be relative to a particular place or time. This fact might be enough for some to jettison the average view. We might want to embrace relativity with respect to well-being. The reason seems to be that there simply is no absolute or objective average available. The average is always

changing. This seems to be a significant problem with the average view.

As if the above were not enough, acceptance of the average view could lead to some very radical conclusions. More humans are alive today than there have been at any time prior to this one. The amount of well-being that the average person has today will undoubtedly be quite high and will thus increase the average for members of our species. If this is correct, then the average view implies that the vast majority of individuals who have lived prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century were badly off. The view might just imply that nearly everyone who has lived prior to this century was harmed by coming into existence. After all, the vast majority of individuals who have lived throughout history will most likely have had far less than the average amount of good in their lives that people have today. Therefore, if one combines the average view with some components of my view, I am not certain just how far the average view can take us from my radical conclusion.

At this point, it might not be possible to avoid relativity. However, if we must embrace relativity and the average view, then we are confronted with a slippery slope. How far should we take relativity? Should well-being be relativized to times and cultures? Should we relativize the well-being of females and males within a species? These are difficult questions to answer. Unfortunately, if we are to make sense of a relativized version of the average view, we would need to confront them. This is unfortunate for it now appears that embracing relativity will not save the average view either. Embracing relativity was one way to avoid some of the counter-intuitive intuitions that surfaced in my discussion of the average view. However, it now seems clear that relativity presents problems of its own.

I think that we would be better off simply rejecting the average view. First, it

makes use of many dubious assumptions. Second, and more important, it might not be possible to avoid relativity. Yet, even if we combine the average view with relativity, it appears as though we are confronted with a slippery slope.<sup>29</sup>

## IX.

I have argued that being deprived of a new satisfied preference violates a person's interests and is thus a harm. One way to resist my radical conclusion would be to deny that being deprived of an extra satisfied preference is a harm at all.

One way to argue for the above claim would be to adopt the view that an extra satisfied preference is neither good nor bad, but rather, that the value of extra satisfied preferences is ethically neutral.<sup>30</sup> This is a rather extreme view. The best defence of the view is found in Fehige's "A Pareto Principle for Possible People." However, in section three of chapter one I argued that we should reject his view. So, I will not recover old ground here.

Perhaps one could make sense of this position independent of Fehige's anti-frustrationism. Consider, my opponent might argue, the different senses in which a certain state of affairs,  $x$ , can be worse for a person,  $P$ .

1. Counter-factual:  $x$  is worse for  $P$  in the sense that  $P$  is worse off than she would have been had  $x$  not happened.
2. Temporal:  $x$  is worse for  $P$  in the sense that  $P$  is worse off than she was before  $x$  happened.

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<sup>29</sup> There might be a better alternative to the average view that generates a conclusion along similar lines. Perhaps one could argue, in the spirit of Williams, that at some point we would become bored with the acquisition of new satisfied preferences. I do not think this is anymore compelling than the average view. My argument is about what is good for preferers, not about what would or would not be boring for them. Even if someone were bored with the acquisition of new preferences, it does not follow that getting more positive value would not be good for them. The attitude that a preferrer bears towards the acquisition of new preferences seems to be largely irrelevant. What matters is that these preferences add positive value to person's lives. See chapter 3 section II for a more detailed discussion of Williams.

<sup>30</sup> Fehige and Wessels have called individuals who hold this position "The Mind Readers." They say that "mind readers look for a mind: no preference, no obligation." See their "Introduction to Possible Preferences" page 370 in *Preferences*.

One might argue that being deprived of an extra satisfied preference is worse for  $P$  in the counter-factual sense. This is because if  $x$  had not happened, then  $P$  would have enjoyed the benefit that  $x$  prevents. Suppose that the absence of  $x$  is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for  $P$  to get an extra satisfied preference. Now, compare the following logically possible lives for  $P$ :

A:  $x$  does not occur.  $P$  gets the satisfied preference. Value: 1.  
 B:  $x$  occurs.  $P$  does not get the satisfied preference. Value: 0.

Of course, A is better for  $P$  than B. However, notice that, or so my opponent might argue,  $x$  does not count as an extra bad thing in  $P$ 's life. The reason is that as long as the only impact  $x$  has on  $P$  is to prevent the acquisition of an extra satisfied preference, then  $P$  is not worse off than she was before  $x$  happened. Therefore, it looks as if counter-factual states of affairs are neutral.<sup>31</sup>

Now, if something is ethically neutral, then this means that it is neither bad nor good. All harms are bad for persons. Counter-factual states of affairs are ethically neutral for persons. Therefore, counter-factual states of affairs are not harms.

I do not think that this argument is persuasive. To begin, counter-factual states of affairs like the one in which  $P$  is deprived of an extra satisfied preference are considered to be the best way of explaining the harm of death.<sup>32</sup> If one accepts the view that being deprived of an extra-satisfied preference is not a real harm but, rather, a neutral state of affairs, then it seems that the "harm" of death would also turn out to be neutral. I think that this is an implausible view.

First, any view that committed us to the position that death is neutral will run the

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<sup>31</sup> Some would prefer it if I called counter-factual harms "extrinsic harms." However, the choice between the two labels is not of any significance.

<sup>32</sup> See Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper* and Holtug, "On the Value of Coming Into Existence."

risk of being highly counter-intuitive. Most people regard murder, for example, as the worst crime a person can commit. It is generally thought that killing another individual, other things being equal, is extremely bad. These rather common views do not mesh well with the view that counter-factual situations are ethically neutral. If something is ethically neutral it means that it is neither good nor bad. Alternatively, if  $x$  is neutral,  $x$  is equally as good as  $\sim x$ . The deprivational character of death is not like this. Consider the following scenario. Say that Roger dies at time  $t_1$ . However, if he had not died, then he would have acquired a new preference at  $t_2$  that would have been instantly satisfied. Common-sense tells us that it is bad that Roger missed out on the new satisfied preference. We do not think that it is neither good nor bad. We do not think that it is just as good for Roger to have the new satisfied preference as it is for him not to have the new satisfied preference. Counter-factual deprivations do not seem to be neutral.

Second, even if we could count counter-factual deprivations as neutral, it would lead to some strange comparative evaluations concerning the badness of death. Consider the following cases:

Sam dies and misses out on acquiring a new satisfied preference with a value of 1.

Tom dies and misses out on acquiring a new satisfied preference with a value of 3.

The strange view I mentioned above is that the deaths of Sam and Tom are *ceteris paribus* equivalent. If we think that counter-factual deprivations are neutral in value, then all we can say about the two cases is the following:

Sam dies and misses out on acquiring a new satisfied preference. Value: 0.

Tom dies and misses out on acquiring a new satisfied preference. Value: 0.

This appearance is deceptive. Clearly their losses are not equally bad. The total disvalue

of Tom's death, one would think, is -3 and the total disvalue of Sam's death is -1. Neutrality always has zero value. Yet, if we focus on temporal harms only, we seem to be committed to the view that the two deaths are of equal (neutral) value.

There is another problem with not viewing the non-acquisition of a satisfied preference as a harm. The fact of the matter is that, fundamentally, "the idea of harming involves a comparison" (Broome 236). In order to harm an individual one only needs "to make her less well off than she would otherwise have been" (Broome 236-237). Fundamental to the idea of harm is making a person's life less good than it could have been. Ignoring this fact is one of the errors of thinking that counter-factual deprivations are not harms. Making a person's life less good than it could have been is exactly what depriving a person of a new satisfied preference does.

Accepting the view that counter-factual deprivations are neutral seems to commit us to an overly restricted view of what harm involves. Causing a person's life to be less good than it might otherwise have been is sufficient for harming her. There can, of course, be other ways of harming a person. However, in order to harm a person, all one needs to do is deprive her of a new satisfied preference.

Now, harms cannot contribute to the positive value of a life. It does not make sense to say that a harm is neutral either. I have argued that we are not indifferent about harms. Therefore, harms are bad for persons. Denying a person a new satisfied preference is bad for her. Therefore, denying a person a new satisfied preference is a harm. If it is a harm for a person, then it must have a disvalue for her. This is what I have argued. I will put the view that counter-factual states of affairs cannot be harmful for a person aside.



There is a related objection that I will address. The main problem with my view, one might argue, is that I have collapsed two distinct sorts of “harms” and masked the difference by employing the concept of interest violations. Granted, my opponent might argue, a frustrated preference is a harm. Yet, this is entirely different from the sense in which being deprived of an extra satisfied preference is a harm. Perhaps it is correct that it is bad to be denied an extra good thing, but in order for it to be relevant I need to show that it is *intrinsically* bad for a person to be denied a good thing. In determining whether a person is better off in one scenario than another, what one needs to look at is the person’s receipt of *intrinsic* values in each scenario.

In response, I will advance four claims. First, in chapter three I claimed that deprivationism, just like Fehige’s frustrationist approach, presents a novel way of looking at preference-based views and well-being in general. This comment should be taken at face value. I also stated in the introduction that my project, in part, consists of setting out and exploring the plausibility of a novel approach to well-being. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that I have rejected certain elements of orthodox theories of well-being.

Second, I have argued for my unitary view of harm over the course of several chapters. The above criticism merely presents an alternative framework and assumes it to be correct. We are given no reason to take the extrinsic/intrinsic distinction seriously.

Third, I believe that the primary intuition that drives deprivationism is widespread, strong, and is in need of explanation.<sup>33</sup> The central intuition behind my view

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<sup>33</sup> See page 58 of Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been* for a view that maps closely with the central intuition behind deprivationism. Also, see pages 349-350 of his “Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence.” In this article Benatar states “That we are born destined to die is a serious harm.” I agree full heartedly.

is this. Throughout our lives we are acquainted with a multitude of goods. Unfortunately, there is a limit to the amount of good each of us will have in our lives. Eventually each of us will die and we will be permanently cut off from the prospect of any further good. Existence, viewed in this way, seems to be a cruel joke. Deprivationalism is intended to capture and explain this intuition. It is difficult to see how anything short of a complete rejection of extrinsic value is capable of accomplishing this. Undoubtedly, some people, including myself, will find the intuition more powerful and more central to their thinking than the extrinsic/intrinsic distinction.

Last and most important, in the next chapter I will show that deprivationalism is a good candidate for Theory X. Indeed, several decades of research in population ethics seem to suggest that the best solutions to problems in population ethics tend to have extremely radical implications.<sup>34</sup> On this score, deprivationalism is no better or worse than its competition. This makes one wonder whether any conventional attempt at finding Theory X will succeed. If this is correct, then perhaps my opponent should reconsider the importance of the objection under consideration.

## X.

As I see it, there is one option remaining for my opponent. In an attempt to deny my radical conclusion, my opponent could deny CP. CP states that the values of harms and benefits are ethically commensurable. Accepting CP has an important implication. If we accept CP, then we must reject lexical orderings of harm and benefit.

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, the views of Benatar and Fehige discussed throughout this dissertation. Also note the rejection of transitivity by Temkin, Rachels and Persson. This tactic is extremely unorthodox. Ryberg, Tännsjö, and Arrhenius point out, for example, that “giving up the transitivity of “better than” would demand a *major revision* of our notion of practical reasoning. A transitive preference ordering has usually been assumed as part of the definition of a rational agent in economic and rational choice theory” (emphasis added, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2006/entries/repugnant-conclusion>).

A lexical ordering allows one value to “dominate” another. Lexical orderings are quite common in philosophy. For example, W.D. Ross applies a lexical ordering to pleasure and virtue:

With respect to pleasure and virtue...*no* amount of pleasure is equal to any amount of virtue...virtue belongs to a higher order of value...than pleasure ever reaches...while pleasure is comparable in value with virtue (i.e., can be said to be less valuable than virtue) it is not commensurable with it, as a finite duration is not commensurable with an infinite duration.<sup>35</sup>

The above quote illustrates a lexical view about pleasure and virtue. Another example is Benatar’s view. Benatar argues that when “a certain threshold of pain is passed, no amount of pleasure can compensate for it” (Benatar 46). There are different ways of characterizing lexical views. The kind that is best suited to my purposes is the following:

*The Lexical View.* If  $x$  is lexically more valuable than  $y$ , then no amount of  $y$ , no matter how great, can outweigh *any* amount of  $x$ .

The most important feature of this definition is that it allows us to impose a lexical structure on harms and benefits.<sup>36</sup> CP is a view about the commensurability of harms and benefits. Therefore, I need a view that will allow for a comparison of harms and benefits. The Lexical View is, then, exactly what will serve our purposes.

The Lexical View can support the view that if positive ethical value is lexically more valuable than negative disvalue, then no amount of ethical disvalue can outweigh any amount of positive ethical value. This view, applied to the context of my argument, might say that the positive value of actual satisfied preferences is lexically more valuable than the disvalue of any amount of harm. Of course, The Lexical View is incompatible

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<sup>35</sup> See Ross, *The Right and the Good*. Page 150.

<sup>36</sup> For examples of other lexical views in this area see Mulgan’s “The Lexical Claim” in his *Future People*, page 67 and pages 23-24 of Broome’s *Weighing Lives*. Mulgan, for instance, offers the following analysis: “If  $x$  is lexically more valuable than  $y$ , then, once we have a *sufficient* amount of  $x$ , no amount of  $y$  can compensate for a *significant* reduction in  $x$ .”

with commensurability and thus CP. However, if The Lexical View was correct, then it would have a very important implication. It would imply that my radical conclusion could be false. It could imply that no amount of disvalue can outweigh any amount of positive value. If we have reason to embrace The Lexical View, or a view relevantly similar to it, my pessimistic conclusion will be circumvented.

I will not argue against The Lexical View. I want to remain undecided with respect to the truth of The Lexical View. I will only claim that I prefer CP and that The Lexical View is a rival view that is possible to hold. What matters is that if one embraces commensurability, then one must reject any lexical ordering of harm and benefit. The catch is that if one rejects lexical orderings of harms and benefits, then one will most likely embrace commensurability and thus my pessimistic conclusion. This is the dilemma I wish to present.

The significance of this dilemma is most pronounced for someone like Broome who rejects all lexical views. Broome, for example, argues along the following lines:

I think nothing is lost by ruling out the lexical view, because it is so implausible. Indeed, it is implausible that any value lexically dominates any other...The view that is not consistent with the discrete-time model is the view that *any* extension of a person's life, however short, is better than improving the life by letting the person see the Northern Lights. This lexical view is the extreme limit of progressively more extreme views. These views become implausible before they reach the limit, and we need give no credence to the limiting, lexical view. This is true of any view that gives lexical priority to any value.<sup>37</sup>

Broome maintains that lexical views are implausible. Therefore, Broome would reject The Lexical View. Broome must reject lexical orderings because a key assumption of his view, the assumption that the betterness orderings is continuous, clashes with lexical views. The primary effect of continuity is to exclude "lexical elements in the betterness

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<sup>37</sup> *Weighing Lives*, pages 24-25.

ordering” (Broome 28). This implies that lexical orderings cannot apply to values. The assumption of continuity is essential for Broome’s project. Without continuity, he will have to find a different guarantor for another vital component of his project; namely, that the betterness relation can be represented by a value function.

However, in rejecting lexical orderings, Broome would accept a principle relevantly similar to CP. If Broome accepts CP, and as long as there is not a third option that he could pursue, Broome will have to accept my pessimistic conclusion. Indeed, this would most likely hold for anyone who rejects lexical orderings and instead embraces the commensurability of harms and benefits. If one has reason to reject The Lexical View and is unable to point out a major flaw in my argument, one will have to conclude that existence is worse for persons than non-existence, no matter how good their lives may seem.

I have attempted to find a significant flaw in my argument and have failed. Therefore, the dilemma I have presented is a real one and quite serious. It is especially serious for Broome. Continuity rules out lexical orderings. If he cannot embrace commensurability due to the pressure that my pessimistic conclusion puts on him, then he must turn to lexical orderings. However, this means that he cannot make the assumption that the betterness ordering is continuous and thus cannot make the assumption that betterness can be represented by a mathematical function. This casts serious doubt over the mere *possibility* of his project, that is, investigating the form of the betterness relation between distributions.

I have presented the above dilemma as one that is particularly serious for Broome. However, if one wishes to reject lexical structures among harms and benefits,

one will have to work quite hard to avoid my pessimistic conclusion.

## **XI.**

In this chapter I have attempted to find a counter-argument that would do significant damage to my theory. I have failed to find it. My view seems to be on solid ground. I have also presented a dilemma for individuals who want to avoid my pessimistic conclusion. Either deny commensurability and embrace lexical domination among values or embrace my pessimistic conclusion. Of course, there could be a third option for my opponent. However, I have no idea what that third option would be.

## Chapter Five

### I.

In previous chapters I set out and explained my argument for deprivationalism. My discussion in chapter four has shown that deprivationalism is on firm ground. Now I will discuss some of deprivationalism's theoretical consequences. In what follows, I will discuss the three most notorious puzzles in population ethics all of which were raised by Derek Parfit in his masterwork, Reasons and Persons. I will conclude that deprivationalism is a good candidate for Theory X.

### II.

First, I will discuss the Mere Addition Paradox.<sup>1</sup> Suppose there is a world, called "A," with everyone, call them the "A-people," leading lives that are very happy.<sup>2</sup> Now, suppose there is another world called "A+" where there are twice as many inhabitants as A, half of which are as happy as the A-people and half of which, call them the "+-people," are significantly less happy than the A-people but still have lives worth living. Lastly, consider a world called "B" in which there are just as many people as there are in A+ all of which are equally happy. However, overall, the people in B are not as well-off as the A-people, but on average they enjoy slightly higher levels of welfare than the average welfare of a person in A+.

What can we say about these worlds? Our intuitions seem to tell us the following:

1.  $A+ \geq A$ .
2.  $B > A+$ .

Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the Mere Addition Paradox is simply a way of establishing the Repugnant Conclusion, which will be discussed in the next section. However, in keeping with common practice, I will discuss them separately.

<sup>2</sup> Assume that terms such as 'happy' are translatable into preference-based terminology.

### 3. $B > A$ .

It looks like we are committed to a claim like 1 because the addition of new lives that are worth living cannot make a world worse. It also looks as if we must accept 2 because B is undoubtedly better than A+ since these individuals have a greater average welfare. So, if A+ is better than or equal to the value of A and B is better than A+, then, assuming that we can coherently compare the value of worlds, B must be better than A. However, if we accept 3 and thus the conclusion that B is better than A, then we will eventually end up with a world, call it “Z,” in which the population has a very low, albeit positive, quality of life. If we accept the reasoning behind 1-3 above, then we will be committed to the view that Z is indeed better than A. This is plainly absurd.

Fortunately, deprivationism can save us from this unattractive result.<sup>3</sup> What does deprivationism say about Parfit’s “Mere Addition Paradox?” According to the paradox, the additional inhabitants of A+ enjoy less than maximum welfare.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the +-people have not acquired infinitely extensive sets of satisfied preferences. It follows, according to deprivationism, that the +-people should never have been brought into existence. To see why, recall that there are positive lives according to deprivationism. These are lives with infinite, that is, maximum, utility. One cannot have slightly less than maximum utility on my view because any finite amount of disutility will be obliterated by the infinite value of the omega sequence. A central component of deprivationism is that it is wrong to bring a person into existence who

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<sup>3</sup> Fehige’s view yields a nearly identical solution to this paradox. Benatar also denies that A+ is better than or equal to A. For Benatar, A+ is worse than A because A+ involves extra lives and thus extra harm. So Benatar will also find fault with premise 1.

<sup>4</sup> On my view, a population with very high welfare can only be one whose members each enjoy an omega sequence of satisfied preferences. Therefore, as with Fehige’s view, the only way I can make sense of the A-people, that is, people whose lives are very good, is to assume that they each enjoy maximum welfare.



will never acquire an omega sequence of satisfied preferences, that is, maximum welfare. This is because such lives are worse than not existing at all. Positive value in a life is an all or nothing proposition according to deprivationism. Either one is an A-person or one does not have a life above zero welfare. Deprivationism demands that we reject premise 1 above. World A+ cannot be better than, or even equally as good as, world A. Therefore, deprivationism escapes the Mere Addition Paradox.

### III.

I will now discuss Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion. As I stated above, the Repugnant Conclusion is closely related to the Mere Addition Paradox. It should not surprise us, therefore, if a solution to one will provide us with a solution to the other.

Briefly, the Repugnant Conclusion says that for any population of individuals with extremely happy lives, we can imagine some other, larger population where everyone leads lives just barely above the neutral level which is better than the very happy population provided that it contains enough people. More precisely, imagine a world with a population of about twenty billion people called "A" where everyone leads very happy lives. Compare A to a world, call it "Z," where everyone leads lives that are just barely worth living. Suppose that the population of Z is about two hundred billion. Z has greater total well-being than A. This is simply a mathematical fact. Therefore, Z is a better world than A. This result, we are supposed to think, is repugnant.

Clearly, deprivationism blocks the Repugnant Conclusion for the same reason that it blocks the Mere Addition Paradox. The Z world people have less than maximum welfare, therefore, it was wrong to bring them into existence. Deprivationism says that anyone who does not have an omega sequence of satisfied preferences is harmed by

existing. It is clearly wrong to bring a person into existence who would be better off not existing. Therefore, it is wrong to bring the Z world people into being. Z cannot be better than A.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV.

Lastly, I will address the Non-Identity Problem. Consider the following cases:<sup>6</sup>

1. A pregnant woman suffers from an illness that will cause her child to be born with a debilitating disease. However, if she undergoes treatment for the condition, then she will be cured and her child will be perfectly healthy.
2. A woman suffers from a condition such that, if she becomes pregnant now, her child will be born with a debilitating disease. However, if she postpones conception a year, then she will have a perfectly healthy child.

What should these women do? Most people will claim that the woman in 1 should receive the treatment for her condition. Obviously, this would result in a child with a happier, better life. Most people will say that the woman in 2 should wait to conceive and have a different, healthy child later. However, the problem 2 presents is that there is a change of identity. The child the woman will have if she waits will not be the same child she would have had were she to conceive while ill. The question is, then, how should this change in identity affect our moral evaluation of these cases?

My answer to the Non-Identity Problem should not be surprising. For a deprivationalist like myself the problem never gets off the ground, not in any realistic context that is. Every person who will not attain maximum welfare is harmed by being brought into existence. Non-existence is always the best alternative for a person because existence always results in serious, uncompensated harm. Surely if a person's life is

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<sup>5</sup> Benatar points out that if, for example, the impersonal total view takes account of his view, then it may be able to avoid the repugnant conclusion. On this view, the repugnant conclusion only arises because of the false assumption that it is good to have extra lives that are worth continuing.

<sup>6</sup> My discussion here closely resembles the discussion by Jesper Ryberg, Torbjörn Tännsjö, and Gustaf Arrhenius in their, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/repugnant-conclusion>.

worse lived than lived, it is better that she never exists. Deprivationalism presents a clear ban on procreation in any real-life case. Therefore, neither woman should have *any* child because any child either woman could have will be the subject of serious harm. In any case, conceiving a child causes it to be in a very bad state. Any decision these mothers make barring non-conception in case 2 and abortion in case 1 is seriously wrong.<sup>7</sup>

## V.

Before concluding this chapter, I will discuss deprivationalism's implications concerning Different Number Choices and Same Number Choices in detail. In Reasons and Persons Parfit distinguishes between two types of moral choices. Same People Choices have to do with how one's actions will affect people in the future, as opposed to which people, if any, come to exist. Different People Choices are the choices one makes that affect the people who will come to exist in the future. There are two types of Different People Choices. In Same Number Choices one's choice has an affect on *who* exists, but not how many people exist. In Different Number Choices one's choice concerns how many people will exist.

Specifically, deprivationalism tells us that in Different Number Choices we should always favour the outcome with fewer people. As long as we are considering individuals who will lead finite lives, we should always choose the population policy that will result in the fewest number of preferers. As I have stated elsewhere in this dissertation, the ideal population for one like ours is zero. As I indicated above in my

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<sup>7</sup> Benatar, for example, suggests two different ways of dealing with the non-identity problem. First, Benatar shows that his view can solve this problem by appealing to Feinberg's argument that coming into existence can be worse for the person than not existing at all. Secondly, Benatar appeals to the notion that "even if coming into existence is not *worse*, it may still be *bad* for the person who comes into existence. Since the alternative is *not bad* we can say that the person is thereby harmed" (Benatar 173).

discussion of the Mere Addition Paradox, I think that non-conception and abortion are the best means of bringing about a zero population.

In Same Number Choices, deprivationalism says that all realistic options will lead to negative outcomes because everyone with a finite life has a life below the bottom limit of neutrality. That is, all preferrers in the actual world have infinitely bad lives and should not have been brought into existence. However, as I discussed in chapter four, it might be possible to prefer creating one bad life over another bad life because of the kinds of satisfied and frustrated preferences a life will contain.<sup>8</sup> Yet, it should be noted that in any real-life scenario, any option we could pursue within the context of Same Number Choices will bring about negative, undesirable consequences.

## VI.

In this chapter I have discussed three notorious problems in population ethics. Deprivationalism presents a clear strategy for escaping The Repugnant Conclusion and The Mere Addition Paradox. The Non-Identity Problem is neutralized as well. Parfit's challenge in Reasons and Persons was to devise a theory of beneficence that could escape these cases without leading to other unacceptable conclusions. Parfit failed to find a theory—"Theory X"—that would meet these requirements. If the conclusions in this dissertation are correct, then deprivationalism is a good candidate for Theory X.

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<sup>8</sup> See sections II and VII of chapter four for my views on why we might prefer to bring one infinitely bad life into existence rather than another infinitely bad life.

## Conclusion

### I.

In the introduction I stated that I was interested in attempting to find a novel theory that could provide us with guidance in evaluating the goodness of a person's life and of a given world. The theory that I have developed is called deprivationalism. Deprivationalism provides clear answers to both questions. It is wrong to bring into existence a person whose life is worse lived than not, that is, a life below the neutral level. I take this claim to be self-evident. According to my view, any life that does not contain an infinite amount of good is below the neutral level. As for the second question, I have assumed that the value of an empty world, that is, a world with no preferrers and thus no preferences in it, is neutral. I have also assumed that the existence of persons whose lives are better not lived than lived makes a world a worse place. It follows that any world only populated by individuals who do not have an infinite number of satisfied preferences is worse than nothing at all.

In posing the above questions, I hoped to offer an axiological theory that could give us guidance concerning practical decision making in everyday life. For what good is ethics, or philosophy in general, if it cannot change and improve people's lives? If deprivationalism is correct, then everyone in our world was harmed by being brought into existence. All of us would have been better off never existing. Nobody has a life that has positive value in our world. Therefore, it follows that our world, being a non-empty world full of badly off individuals, is worse than an empty world. The ideal population for our world must be zero. These conclusions rest on a number of claims, some axiological, some purely factual, that are, for the most part, relatively uncontroversial.

The existence of every moral patient in our world rests on a crude moral miscalculation. As I see it, non-procreation is the best means of rectifying this mistake. Of course, special problems present themselves when we consider the difficulty that non-human preferers present in this context. However, I am sure that a species that is as advanced as ours could undoubtedly find a solution to this problem.

Perhaps the day will never come when people realize that moral patients like us should cease to exist. It would be an unconscionable tragedy if we never do. I remain optimistic, however. Some very interesting arguments have recently been advanced in support of the conclusion that it is always worse for a person to live than not. I suspect that many more will follow. Until the day that individuals begin to take non-procreation seriously on a widespread scale, perhaps all we can do is follow Schopenhauer:

The conviction that the world, and therefore man too, is something which really ought not to exist is in fact calculated to instil in us indulgence towards one another: for what can be expected of beings placed in such a situation as we are? From this point of view one might indeed consider that the appropriate form of address between man and man ought to be, not *monsieur, sir*, but *fellow sufferer, compagnon de misères*. However strange this may sound it corresponds to the nature of the case, makes us see other men in a true light and reminds us of what are the most necessary of all things: tolerance, patience, forbearance and charity, which each of us needs and which each of us therefore owes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "On the Suffering of the World," Section 9.

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